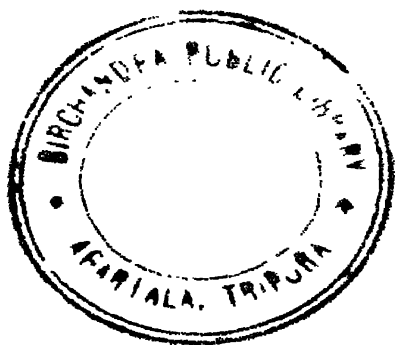


# TOUCHING

# Touching

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GWEN DAVIS



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*By Gwen Davis*

NAKED IN BABYLON  
SOMEONE'S IN THE KITCHEN WITH DINAH  
THE WAR BABIES  
SWEET WILLIAM  
THE PRETENDERS  
TOUCHING





*For Marion, who knows who she  
really is . . .*

*And for all of us, who are trying to  
know who we really are.*



In French history, this was the heyday of the "July Monarchy"—the reign of King Louis-Philippe, who was brought to power by the Revolution of 1830 and ousted by the Revolution of 1848. Louis-Philippe was known as the "Citizen King"—also as "The Pear," from the unfortunate resemblance of the shape of his head to the fruit whose name is sometimes used in France to denote a dull fellow. Member of the Orleans family though Louis-Philippe was, his regime was blatantly, almost aggressively, middle-class. His advice to his subjects was: "Get rich!"

FRANCIS STEEGMULLER: Translator's Introduction to *Madame Bovary*



# TOUCHING



I think I asked Soralee to go with me to the marathon because things shared with Soralee took on an automatic delight. Her incredible energy and ebullience gave to the rather stodgy elegance of a lunch at the Bistro the quality of a happy picnic, where Beverly Hills ladies, stopping by the table to greet her or wonder about me, were treated like harmless ants, discovered, whooped over, and then gently brushed away; not because she disliked or feared insects, but because they might interfere with the meal or distract her from the conversation, which for Soralee was always a feast.

She had very little cynicism about anything, in spite of priding herself on being a sophisticate; whereas I, who constantly astonish myself with my innocence, am cynical about nearly everything, including love and life and the plight of women and pot and revolution. I



try not to let this slip over into my reporting, although the magazine does prefer its journalism to be vaguely tinted with jade; but from time to time things which should be, must be, looked at with no prejudice come out of my typewriter with a few symptoms of jaundice. So I thought it would behoove me, and the article, to take Soralee along to the naked marathon, and see it partly through her fresh, clean eyes.

She did not hesitate about going, any more than she would have had second thoughts about seeing a movie she had read conflicting reviews of: her psychiatrist's anteroom was filled with articles about T-groups, pro and con, she subscribed to *Psychology Today*, she had been through Encounter sessions at Synanon where she went at least once a week to work and play the Game, a number of her friends had gone through some form of sensitivity training and come back either ecstatic or mildly destroyed, and she quite simply and enthusiastically wanted to see for herself. As she wanted to see everything for herself, except dying.

Life was alive and living in Soralee, and it was impossible not to catch a little of it being with her. That was why I thought I wanted her to go with me; except that once we were there, sitting around in the circle with the eighteen other people, and the time was almost on us to take off our clothes, and twenty hours stretched before us, I realized that I was close to being terrified, and I had brought her along not so much for substance as support. As I would never

have brought my husband for support. As she could never bring along her Ted for support, because he did not support her, could never support her in areas that really mattered, because men can only give the go-ahead, float free, do what you have to do to try and be fulfilled, to women like Soralee, who embark on every day, on every new cause and experience as if it were a first visit to Disneyland. Men can only indulge or permit that kind of enthusiasm, they cannot go along with it completely, totally, lovingly, and that's what real support is, and that's what men can't give. I realize how militantly feminist and faintly dykey that sounds, and I don't believe myself to be either. But my very full life (in comparison to other women's) has come up echoing empty, and the blame has to be placed somewhere. I can't just put it in the hollow between my legs.

Soralee, as I said, had none of this bitterness or cynicism, so I was happy she was there for whatever reason. Fear, because I am not as bold as you need to be to foray into the unexplored, uncharted lands of fashion or radical bombings or fringe groups that need to be covered for a news magazine, and I was grateful to have her twisting up that perilous canyon to the ranch, physically breaking the trail for me, making me more secure even though we came in separate cars. She wanted the option to leave early if it became too much for her. Like me, she had no idea what to expect, but her psychiatrist had disapproved of her going: too little

was known about these groups in general and Dr. Simon Herford in particular for him to give his approval. He had referred to it as a "Nudie Cutie," and asked her to wait until he could find out more about Herford. But he could control Soralee's enthusiasms no more than the rest of the world could, and she had already promised me she would go. But because she loved him as much as she loved me (she *liked* and *disliked* no one, she either adored them or they didn't exist for her at all) and went to her hours as much to brighten his day as to explore her own head, she did promise him she would leave if things got out of hand.

So she drove her own car, her three-month-old chrome-plated Riviera, too big, too wide, much too luxurious for Soralee. Too luxurious because she couldn't have cared less what she was driving: The ashtrays were overflowing, and she had yet to give a thought to emptying them or having the car washed. A car was just something to get somewhere in, and not a deity as it seemed to most of her contemporaries in California. Just as her body was just something to move her spirit around in, and she was totally unaware of its beauty. She knew what her face looked like, but that was only because she washed it so often and there was no way she could be unconscious of the astonishing clarity and brilliance of the eyes that looked back from the mirror. But she was always surprised when people told her she was pretty, because if she was talking to them at all, and interested enough to be talking to them, she was absorbed in

how beautiful they were, because of what they were saying. She could not get over the fantastic line of my jaw, she told me all the time, because she had only that tiny little point of a chin, and my jaw had absolute majesty. Such things actually had the effect of making you feel you had been foolish to worry about the wrinkles starting around your eyes.

I followed the sunset winding through the unpaved escarpment of road, behind my girl friend the fearless pioneer, and I entered the guesthouse where the talk part was to be conducted, and I tried to sit with her same cross-legged ease in the pillow-boundaried circle on the rug while Dr. Simon Herford passed the egg timer. Name, first only. How many naked marathons you had been to, how you happened to come to this one, as much of your story as you cared to tell in the three minutes before the grains ran out. I was already quite clear on my procedure. I had to tell them I was from a magazine, but had signed an agreement with Simon not to use anyone's name or reveal anything that might occur during the marathon that anyone there objected to my telling. Naturally I intended to protect my journalistic flank—not revealing their names, of course, that would be dishonest and opening the magazine to threats of libel. But if anything occurred that was actually outrageous I fully intended to report it as such and just not use Herford's name.

He would have hated that, of course, being anonymous. He had almost had an orgasm over the phone at

the information that we wanted to do a piece on his marathon. Simon Herford was not publicity shy, any more than he was timid about nakedness. Seeing him for the first time I had to believe the honesty of what he claimed he was trying to do: Stripping the body bare so he could do the same with the emotions. I could not imagine his true purpose was exhibitionism, as he was a singularly Santa-Clausy-looking man, pudgy rosy fingers toying with his long white sideburns, hair like a great white fox hat just sitting on top of a cherubic face. And fat. Quite fat. Considering my anxiety about revealing the beginning of a spare tire around my rib cage, I couldn't think he'd be anxious to bob that belly around, if his purpose were anything other than getting to emotional truth. I didn't know if I liked him yet; but there was something shamany about him, tribal-leader bright and intuitive, and anything atavistic stirs my intellect, if not my soul. I like to think we have racial memories, and I would like to feel I had once belonged to a primitive tribe. If I had, Simon Herford would have been a natural choice for leader.

He was conducting the proceedings with a combination of gusto and impatience to get on with it, not letting anyone go beyond the prescribed three minutes no matter how absorbed they became in their own stories. The atmosphere was already faintly clubby and chummy, partly because we were sitting on the floor,

which is a young thing, and young things are more open, and partly because there was a shared intimacy among those in the group who had been there before that the newcomers seemed anxious to become part of. Soralee leaned her long big body against the wall and gave her eyes, her marvelous eyes, completely over to the face of whoever was speaking, and her smile to truths that were embarrassed or funny. I was grateful to her for that reason too: So much of it was funny, and I tend to be so serious and intense about anything human that might camouflage pain that much of the time I fail to see comedy. Soralee saw comedy all the time, and I could affirm it where I wasn't sure it existed simply by checking her crystal face.

Oh, some things we all knew were funny: There was a minister from Pasadena who had been coming to these sessions for months and was conducting sensitivity training sessions at his church; beside him was a woman member of his congregation who hadn't known he would be there and was already giggling with embarrassment, as Simon bellowed that *there* was a fantasy and a half, to see your own minister naked. Everyone laughed at that. But I couldn't have summoned up a smile about the girl, the big-breasted girl named Trudy who kept interrupting with the angry fact that she hated penises, as Simon told her to hold on to that, we'd get around to penises later, or the obese chaste schoolteacher named Cynthia who, no, hadn't tried to have relations with a man since the last marathon, and hadn't

managed to work up the courage to masturbate either. ("Our Blessed Virgin Mother never had relations with a man, and you wouldn't have told her to masturbate, Simon." "I wouldn't bet on that," Soralee said.) Things like that wouldn't have struck me as even vaguely comic, because I suppose in spite of all my liberated pretensions I am somewhat of a prude, maybe even a prig, and hearing women openly carrying on about penises and masturbation barely forty minutes into an encounter is too much for me.

But seeing Soralee's smile, hearing her deep-throated laughter, made me think perhaps I ought to suspend my own prudish disbeliefs and try to see the whole experience for what it was. What it was hadn't come clear to me yet, and I'm not sure, even now, especially in view of what happened and the churning of emotions still going on, that I'm straight yet on what it was. But for the moment at least she gave me the courage to try and just let it happen. She also gave me the strength to put up with Simon's vulgarity, his gross, obvious attempts to put people at their sexual ease by using the coarsest words to describe their most sensitive fears.

"You mean you're afraid of getting a *rod* on?" he shouted at the dark, terribly hairy young shipping clerk. "You're afraid if you get into the pool naked with a lot of pretty women you're going to get a rod on?"

Well, wouldn't that be a shame, wouldn't that be a reason to hang your fucking head, that you see a lot of pretty women naked and you get a rod on. Did your mama tell you that was a disgusting thing to do?"

The shipping clerk's head went further into his chest, his hairy fingers pulled at the mat of the carpet, and his eyes fluttered like dark heavily petaled flowers caught in an ungentle wind. "I didn't . . . I wouldn't want to. . . ."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Nick," Simon said. "Some of my best friends get rod ons."

"Rods on," Soralee corrected. "Excuse me, I can't stand bad grammar."

Nick's three minutes were over and I for one was delighted because he was boring. You didn't have to be a psychologist like Simon Herford to see his fear, to know his fear and to find his fear boring. There were two sociologists in the group, a Ph.D. in chemistry, a television executive, a man who ran a nudist colony, a self-proclaimed genius who annoyed me with his deep yoga breathing and his pronunciamento that he had discovered the seat of his staggering cerebral power with acid, several bright and attractive men and women who amazed me by their being there, a handsome service-station attendant who came to Simon's marathons all the time, and left filled with love, which I wondered if he dispensed to his customers along with gasoline, and assorted men and women who were at the marathon because they had begun to believe they were dead in-



side, they didn't feel things any more, or wanted to, or had started to feel because they had come to Simon, or felt sure they would soon because they had friends who had come to Simon and had begun to change and feel.

All these facts spilled through their three minutes: They are not my impressions or my interpretations. I was too overcome by the highly charged atmosphere to have too many impressions, other than personal panic. A young girl to my left was weeping, openly, wailing her despondence, a despondence the origins of which were unknown to her, but had been released the last time she went in the pool with Simon. I didn't need that kind of despair released in me. I wondered what I was doing there, and why I didn't run away, and then I remembered I worked for a magazine. I was covering a story and that was all. There was no need for me to get emotionally involved. A good journalist shouldn't get emotionally involved. All I had to do was remember I was a journalist, and that would immunize me to the emotion.

Soralee did not appear to want to be immunized, as she never appeared to want to be oblivious to anything that could make her see or grow. The amusement was radiant on her face as she listened to a young, bearded, handsome boy who had started a Growth Center in Oregon, and had come to observe Simon, tell that the uptightness of his marriage had been obliterated by nude marathons. Since the last marathon he

and his wife had had as many as three peak experiences a night.

"Peak experiences," Soralee said, and her head leaned slightly toward her shoulder as if she needed to face the phrase from a fresher angle. "Peak experiences? But you're talking about *screwing*. Is that what this is all about?"

"Of course not," Simon said. "It's much more than that."

"Much more than making love," she said, and clapped her long-fingered hands together. "I can hardly wait."

Another man was nervous about exposing himself, and Simon assured him there was nothing to fear. He was worried about size, he said, self-conscious about his size; in the silence that followed most of the men averted their eyes from the other men. Soralee, her warm voice easing the chill that seemed to have invaded the room, said that maybe what that proved was that it wasn't only women that had penis envy, that men had it, too, that her husband told her that the first place men looked in the locker room, in the steam bath, was at each other's equipment, and maybe men envied each other's penises. Simon told her that was true, probably quite true. He looked at her interestedly, checked his watch and narrowed his eyes against the soft lighting to make out where the grains were in the egg timer, as if he

could hurry it on to her by sheer wishing to get her story.

Finally it was in her hand, her long, pale, rosily clean fingers with their remarkably oval nails clutching the glass around its feminine middle, holding it for a moment as if to suspend time, before her story had to run with the grains. Naturally I assumed she would tell them she was there because she was interested in everything, and she was my friend, and I had asked her to be there.

She tipped it over. "My name is Soralee," she said, and for the first time in my memory of her, her eyes were less than bright. "This is my first nude marathon. I'm here because when I was fifteen years old, I was sitting under a tree, reading a book, smelling the grass, and all I wanted from life was to grow up, so I could have a handsome successful husband and beautiful children. Now I'm thirty-two years old, and I have the husband, and I have the beautiful children. And all I want from life is to be back under that tree."

Simon chortled. "Join the rest of us," he said. With that, everyone started laughing. Except me. If there was anyone in the world who was not exactly like the rest of us, discontented, I would have sworn it was Soralee.

I found her for the first time when I was doing a rather Chekovian piece for the magazine on luxury re-

ducing places in Southern California and the women who went there. The Chekov angle was mine: My editor would have been rancid with disbelief at my thought that there was anything that lofty about the plight of bright married women in a leisure society. But I had recently reread *Uncle Vanya* and decided that the permeating despair, the boredom suffocating that landed, faded Russian society was an exact parallel for what was stifling the educated ladies of the upper middle class. The atmospheres were identical, all those decades apart. But of course Chekov could offer his people the hope of reward, the beautiful afterlife that would be theirs with death, because they had lived a just and caring life; a sky full of diamonds was promised Vanya by his niece, because God would know how good he had been and reward him with that sky full of diamonds. But God was dead in California than he was almost anywhere else, so that hope could not be held out to the women who were just struggling to live out their lengthening days by trying to make them seem full.

I admit at the time my outlook was even darker than usual as I was without a housekeeper, my husband was drinking heavily again, and I suspected, having still another affair. I wasn't as angry with him as I should have been, because at the time his painting was going very badly and my writing was going very well, and if he needed that to prove to himself he was a bigger man than I was, I was sorry, but I understood. What I wished for was that he would find a mistress who was

as simple-minded and consumed with household things as he wanted me to be, so she could move in and solve my domestic problems, and I would be free to go back full-time to the office. As it was I had to rush home to be there when the children got home from school, so they would know they had a mother; knowing they had a mother did not seem to consume them as much as I hoped it would. They were getting older, and hugging and kissing seemed less an exchange than a duty that had to be fulfilled before they went out to play with friends who wouldn't slobber over them unless they were wrestling. Having lost them to the more favored occupants of Brentwood treehouses, I was left with only my housewifely chores to perform, and chores they were, and perform them I did, shaking with rage from time to time because I have a tendency to be overwhelmed by menial duties as I never am by important issues. Also I have a theory that for every new modern convenience there is an added inconvenience, and the mere thought of emptying a loaded dishwasher throws me into an absolute panic. I didn't expect Jerry to help me at such times because I knew it would undermine his *macho* in his own mind, even though I don't think it would have unmanned him greatly to make a bed.

But God, I was really trying, and it just never got all into place, that house, at that particular time. And of course that had to be just the moment to find the article, buried somewhere in the second section of the

Los Angeles *Times*, about a divorcee, a Stanford alumna in Encino, drowning her three young children and then killing herself. It might have been an ordinary story of horror and madness were it not for the note she left, which read, "I tried. I tried to keep them clean, I tried to get them dressed and take them shopping and make them interested in books. I tried. I just couldn't do it." I think that said it all. The hopelessness.

So, as I admitted, my mood was darker than usual, when I carried my tired bones and my fevered Chekovian outlook into the reducing salon in Beverly Hills. The participants were mostly wives of important executives or show-business personalities who shared, along with memberships in various charity organizations and private discotheques, a panic about their inner thighs. A number of them were also unregistered, unrecorded members of a totally unpublicized society called the Potato Peelers, which met unofficially on Wednesday afternoons in various bars and restaurants in the Valley, where they were unlikely to bump into anyone they knew, for the sole purpose of picking up strange men. Of course I did not find out about that until later, and it was not exactly a function I could write about under "Modern Living." But for the most part they seemed warm and friendly, inviting me to join Share, and have lunch with them sometime.

I don't like lunching with women any more than I like joining women's organizations, but there was one woman there in the midst of all those who were vaulting wooden horses, strapping themselves to mammoth massage machines, I thought I would really like to know, and that was Soralee. What fascinated me about her immediately was the fact that she did not sweat. She pounded herself against the wall, and rolled on the mats on the floor, and did her mandatory leg lifts on the bar in front of the mirror with a bored angry look on her aristocratic face, stuck her tongue out at herself when she was finished, and never showed a single bead of moisture. The perspiration had to be there because, as she exercised, her straw yellow hair hung straighter and darker, coarsely dank against the fine imposing outline of her skull. But she never wiped her forehead, and the light blue leotard she wore revealed no darkening at the armpits in spite of how flushed her pale pink cheeks became. When I do anything the least bit physical my hair curls up as if I were the spawn of Mary Pickford and Medusa, and my upper lip begins to weep; so anyone whose hair stays straight and who never sweats has to be admired. Besides, it was my intuition that a girl who remained that lovely under such gross conditions and still had the humor to stick her tongue out at her own reflection had to be worth knowing. The intuition was confirmed when they turned the Relax-Acizor up too high, and Soralee, after letting loose an ear-splintering "SHIT!" pulled herself free from the

machinery, connected it up to itself, and short-circuited it.

"I've killed it," she said. "I'm so glad."

"Are you all right?" I asked her in the dressing room.

"I hate this place," she said. "I don't know why I ever let me talk myself into coming here."

"You want to have lunch?" I said.

"Only if you're a heavy drinker."

Naturally she was half-joking about that, as I came to realize she half-joked about every indulgence. She drank martinis because they were cold and wet and had olives in them, and olives were so *interesting*. Just as she consumed food with an almost childlike gusto because it had so many textures and colors and flavors, and wasn't it remarkable what you could find on a plate, or in a refrigerator or a delicacy store like Jurgensen's, where they had so many beautiful baskets. But in all the time we spent together, I rarely saw her really drunk, and when she was, she didn't stumble or weep, she laughed and looked at me with too-wide blank eyes and told me she was absolutely *pissed*, where would I be the next day about one-thirty because she was going to have an extraordinary hangover and would be in violent need of a friendly Bloody Mary, which was so *tall* and *red*, thank God.

That first lunch was memorable because I was so fascinating. Most people are fairly impressed when they



learn what I do, but Soralee didn't care so much about that as how such a fantastically attractive woman with growing children and a majestic jaw could be so bright and productive and have that much history. If it had been anyone but Soralee sitting in the red leather banquettes opposite me in Frascati's I would have felt I was giving my educational and work résumé for a job application or having a nervous breakdown. I am not an open woman, and I am an excellent interviewer, which teaches you even greater tricks of caution; but more information spilled out of me in those two hours than I have ever given anyone except a therapist, and then I was aware that it was costing me thirty-five dollars an hour I couldn't really afford so I better get as much into the time as possible. She found out about my first lover at the University of Chicago (how magnificent to go *there* and be emancipated before rebel things were fashionable), the death of my first husband who was all intellect, the growing alienation from my now husband who was all passion, she even, how incredible, as I think about it now, elicited from me my housekeeper crisis, which like everything, she would remedy instantly.

Up from the table, past the staring, hungry-men-at-lunchtime eyes, oblivious to them and everything except the pay phone by the bar where for one thin dime, which she borrowed from the cashier, she could contact the June Art agency, and they would find me someone, they had to, because I was her new friend.

"They're out to lunch," she said, returning to the table. "But I've left a message on the exchange and they'll call me this afternoon and find you somebody wonderful, I know they will, I'll tell them to get you a lady as great as my Bernice, nothing less, they have to because you're just like me." Waving her breadstick like a magic wand.

"How much do you pay your girl?"

"A lot," she said, "but you can't worry about that. You've got too much to do to drown in anything so dopey as a dirty sink. You'll just have to economize in areas that don't matter, like electricity. Oh, look, a red pepper." Underneath a lettuce leaf, America. "Do you think it's sweet? What'll I do if it's hot, I've got a cold sore on the inside of my lip that's killing me."

"You better leave it then."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," Soralee said. "Then I'd never know. It's sweet, you see, isn't that lucky?"

The restaurant was emptying gradually and I guessed it was well past two-thirty, and I should have been getting back to the office. But I couldn't bring myself to look at my watch for fear she might think I was bored with her, and for the reality that I had never been less bored with anyone.

"You have to go, don't you?" Reading me. Astonishing girl.

"I can be a few minutes late. It's my own fault, I've never talked so much."

"You should. You should talk all the time. You're

infinitely more interesting than most of the people you interview, I'm sure, and how are people going to find out about you if you don't tell them?"

"I'm usually a very secretive woman. A tough can of peas. Not too easy to open up."

"But don't you see how unfair that is? I mean people are running around dying of boredom because there isn't enough around to be genuinely absorbed in, aside from causes, and causes aren't consuming unless you become a fanatic, which you've got to be today if you care about what's going on in the world at all, don't you think? But most people are frightened of getting really involved, so you have to wean them into caring, start them off slowly by getting them interested in specific human beings, and there aren't that many specific human beings obviously worth knowing about. You're obviously worth knowing about, so it's very selfish of you not to share. And you're not a selfish woman, so you can't do that any more." The breadstick waving again. The spell cast. Thirty-six years of frantically preserved privacy ("But it's impossible, you look younger than I do") and how many centuries of inbred Calvinistic reserve, and it was all going to drop away because Soralee said so. And curiously, I didn't resent or disbelieve her. For several hours after that first lunch my heart and my thoughts were ready to spill over, for the world's appraisal and further good.

Naturally I recovered and got my constipated self back again. But I could never be with Soralee and be less

than she wanted me to be: a fiery, remarkable woman, whose soul was as well-developed as her brain. A lithe powerful creature who could have won the javelin throw were such events open to women, but who was content (almost) to triumph in the arenas where grace was excellence, grace was the qualifying entry.

Looking at this now, I see how much of this is me, and no matter what Soralee believed, I am not that remarkable a subject: certainly not in comparison to her. She had been around the world and a half, launched three quarters of the way around by guilty parental money ("Of course I come from a broken home, doesn't everyone?"), engaged to an Italian prince. ("It was my Katharine Hepburn period, she went to Bryn Mawr too, you know, and it was right after *Summertime*, and there he was on the Via Veneto, all salt and pepper like Rossano Brazzi, and we were engaged in three days. I was fat as a pig but they like that, Italian men, and every time he saw me he said, '*Sempre più bella.*' He saw my new car and said, '*Sempre più bella.*' He saw my mink jacket and said, '*Sempre più bella.*' He saw my American passport and said, '*Sempre più bella.*' We might have lived happily ever after except unfortunately I have a very quick ear and inside of two weeks I was speaking fluent Italian and understood every word he said. . . . He was the stupidest man I've ever met. I had an English girl friend, my first kept woman friend,

she was gorgeous and terribly funny, she just happened to be a hooker, and I said to her, 'What shall I do,' and she said in this incredibly lofty accent, 'Mahrry him, darling, Mahrry him and fleeeeee with the title.' I was tempted for about ten seconds, I must admit. I could hear myself being paged around the casinos of the world 'Principessa Soralee, Principessa Soralee,' but I couldn't do it, I just couldn't.

"So I got a series of odd jobs, translating, tutoring American children in Rome, things like that, to get the money—isn't it funny, they're never as anxious to get you home as they are to get you there, are they, it's so chic having a daughter in Europe—and I took this slow boat to China. Literally. To heal my broken heart and starve my way through the Indian Ocean, that sort of thing. It wasn't as adventurous as it sounds, I mean I wanted to lose weight so it seemed easier to physically disappear off the face of the earth for a little while, and I really thought it was the same distance going from Naples to Hong Kong to California to home as it would have been going from Rome to New York. I suppose I should have paid more attention to Mrs. Laubenheimer."

"Mrs. Laubenheimer?"

"My third-grade geography teacher. I wonder if she's still alive, poor lady, I should have paid attention.")

After that there was graduate work at Berkeley where she became involved with some Kerouac disciples who went with her to the Chessman vigil outside San Quen-

tin ("I've got to tell you about that sometime, it has all the elements of the crucifixion, I'm still working it out in my own head, nobody really cares, you see, that's what's so terrible. I mean they had sandwich stands"). Her new friends offered her the crowded sanctuary of their homes, which included a great deal of promiscuous sex and pot smoking, both of which she rejected. ("I suppose I should have let them know how square I really was, and then they wouldn't have gotten so angry when I made fun of them, but I wasn't ready, I wasn't ready to screw around. I really wasn't ready for pot, I thought it was wrong. I love it now, pot, I mean, it's so beautiful getting hung up on the moment, the moment is such an exquisite thing, losing that long-term panic and just seeing *now*, have you ever turned on? You've got to come over sometime with Jerry and we'll all turn on, it's really unbelievable and there's nothing wrong with it, I have a bevy of beautiful doctors all doing research and there is absolutely no damage it can do. Anyone would be insane to go on to anything harder, which they wouldn't have to do if good grass were easily accessible, but the liquor lobbies *will* keep trying to kill that. Of course there is one bad thing about it, and that's that it's illegal. And I don't think it's a good idea for young people in school: it's very important that they keep their long-term panic about where they're going, or they won't work—it's the same as sex really; you have to be mature enough to handle it. God, that sounds old-fashioned. No wonder they were so an-

gry with me at Berkeley. You really had a lover in college, that's fantastic, I must have been retarded. Either that or I was terrified of exposing the great fat belly. I never even went to bed with the prince, can you imagine, but he probably would have been terrible he was so stupid.")

Bobbing like a cork on the ocean of dull afternoons. I looked forward to our lunches, our occasional cocktail dates as if I were going to a rummage sale guaranteed to yield startling bargains. Her past was so rich with incident I wondered if any or all of it were invented, but she would have been insane to make up stories so obviously bizarre. And she was far from insane, unless insanity is being open and honest in a world ass-tight with lies and secrets.

She had come to Hollywood after Berkeley and fallen in love with the mandatory movie star ("Well, you do have to act out that part of every red-blooded young girl's fantasy, don't you? Naturally he was a faggot: so much for the American dream"), gone back East ("I didn't have enough money for another slow boat to China, and how many ways are there to heal a broken heart? Break, break, break, do you love bad poetry? When I was a baby my father used to barrage me with "The Highwayman came riding riding riding up to the old inn door, plaiting a dark red love knot, in her

long black hair,' don't you love that, it's so terrible—I could say the Gettysburg Address when I was two-and-a-half and every time I did they gave me a stick of Beech-Nut. My teeth fell out when I was four”).

In New York she met Ted and after doing everything she could to drive him away (“I mean you can't have training in Kerouac refugees and moron princes and faggot movie stars and then be able to accept this clean, handsome considerate man who really seems to care about you”), married him. (“I didn't mean to, of course, it was such a sensible move: When I first met him I was still fat and being a driven career lady in publishing, and no matter what I did he still seemed to want me, so I figured screw, if *he* likes me like this, if I get thin I can get Cary Grant, so I finally lost the weight, and found out I only wanted Ted. Besides which I hadn't met Cary Grant.”)

All of this biography of course is greatly telescoped, having been revealed over a number of months and lunches. By this I do not mean to imply that any conversation with Soralee was less jam-packed. But the scope and areas of interest were unending, constantly surprising, and often as not, didn't include her at all. (“But you've got to come with me to Synanon, they're doing such incredible work, it isn't just the drug addiction rehabilitation thing any more, they're really trying to



be in the twenty-first century, build their own community, drug free, violence free, color blind, it's incredible. And they need help, it would be such a boon for them if you got interested and wrote what they were doing, really doing to build. It's like a kibbutz without any land, so they have to farm the people, outside people who can help. I know you'd want to help if you could see, and even if you don't feel like helping, you've got to meet some of my tribe. Gingie the Stripper, she's unbelievable, you'll adore her, one of the funniest, brightest, gutsiest ladies alive, her insights are incredible, a great lady really, a fantastically great lady who just happens to have been on heroin and in jail for grand larceny for robbing her girl friend's apartment to get money for dope. But now that she's straight, she's an incredible force for good: sort of a thirty-five-year-old ex-dope fiend Eleanor Roosevelt, only sexy.")

I did not go with her to many of the places she wanted to take me: I did not go to Synanon, and I did not go to fund-raising functions for the Panthers ("But it's only for legal defense fees, Marion, we're not getting them grenades") partly because I was busier than ever, and partly because I am a coward who fears not only for her life and controlled emotions but also has economic pressures and doesn't want to lose her job: Covering an explosion for a magazine is not quite the same as making it seem that a representative of that magazine is a participant in lighting the fuse. I did, however, go

with her to Jurgensen's to see how beautiful the baskets were, and look at the mosaic ceiling of a health-food store she had discovered, and stop by the boutique of a very clever young black named Ola who designed remarkable clothes and should have been as successful as any American designer if only people would find out about her, Soralee said, looking at me with very sharp points in her eyes. ("I must free your spirit, Marion. Either that or we'll have to relocate you at *Women's Wear Daily*.")

Along with my spirit she had also decided to free my eyes, which Louie of Saks could explode into sheer stardom by the clever application of lashes. The atmosphere of the beauty parlor was not unlike the reducing salon where I had first found Soralee: The women were quietly frantic and needful of a mother substitute, which Louie was more than happy to be, making them feel loved or unloved, cared for or not cared for, pretty or not pretty, which he did by captious and beguiling and sadistic turns. I am too old, finally, to be looking for a mother, and I see no point in having that much reverence, patience and pleading humility in the presence of anyone short of a plastic surgeon. My eyes did look a great deal prettier when I left: I went to the preview opening of a new museum that evening feeling more ravishing than I had felt in my life, had a devastating effect on absolutely no one, came home and made love to my husband, who seemed startled but enthusias-

tic. So enthusiastic that my eyelashes bent, and realizing there was no way to straighten them out again short of going back to Louie, I threw them away.

About this time we got a break in the great grisly murders, and the office was in turmoil, so I didn't see Soralee for a while. Crime in California is a great deal like the weather. If pleasure is the absense of pain, which it seems to be for most people with a three-car garage, then the lack of snows and deciduous trees make for good weather. The torrential rains that in winter sweep whole hills and families into muddy oblivion, the fires that devour entire canyons in steamy summer, only serve to point up, by quirky contrast, how temperate the weather usually is. Just as the occasional murder is so bizarre and grotesque it makes you realize how lucky you are to go from day to day without being mugged. But horror after horror unfolded in that office, fear and disbelief struck us all as details began to build, and there was not much time to think about anything else. The atmosphere at work was one of gossipy nausea, which for quite a while carried over into my home. My calendar and my head were too full to think about Soralee.

But at a posh charity benefit opening of a new movie, I saw her again. I hadn't expected to find her there, in the middle of a sequined stream of starlets and pro-

ducers and would-be socialites around town, but then, it would be unfair to anticipate Soralee. She left them all, the glittery people, who seemed less foolish for having her in their midst, to come over to me. With hollers and hugs and total joy, as if we were sisters, long separated by the problems of Corsica.

"But it's beautiful," she said, her scrubbed face glowing. "I didn't want to come at all, this is my night for Synanon, we were just going to send in the money, and at the last minute I decided to be here, and it's because I was going to run into you, you see? Ted." Loud, but never shrill. "Ted, look who's here, it's my friend. My friend Marion."

He pulled himself somewhat reluctantly from the circle of fading moguls and came over to greet me. His face was not quite as open as Soralee's, but he seemed exactly what she told me he was: clean and straightforward, with a fine athletic build stuffed nicely into his tuxedo. He was tall, tall with thick inside-of-the-chestnut-yellow hair, handsome in the style that school-girls admire, and as Soralee had never had a lover when she was a schoolgirl, I was pleased for her. His nose was imposing and straight, and he had a good square jaw (I knew how important jaws were to Soralee). One of his heavily lashed dark eyes had a slight cast to it. Nearly undetectable but I noticed: I have a homosexual friend who's a little mad, who says that people with slight casts in their eyes are very good in bed. That made me happy for her too.

Not that Soralee's life, Berkeley and prince and faggot aside, had been without sex; but most of the comic bed episodes she revealed to me were subtly larded with pain: Her virginity had been lost in the south of Spain to a ruthless young American opportunist, who went on to become very prominent in show business as most ruthless opportunists will. He had mounted her in that late-blooming bed and said, "I'll close my eyes and try to pretend it's someone I like." Not the best way to be broken in, so I was glad Ted had that cast in his eye. And more than just being glad, I was relieved, because when you really care for a friend, no matter how often you say to each other, "We must get together, the four of us," you always put it off as long as possible, out of the fear, usually justified, that the partner will be a disappointment, that he will not be good enough for her, or as funny as she is, or love her as much as she deserves to be loved. Ted seemed, on the face of it, good enough, it would have been asking too much for him to be as funny, but he did have a nice sense of humor, and he seemed taken with her, as he should have been.

After the movie there was a dinner at the Hilton, and Soralee sneaked in and changed place cards so we could be together and try to catch up. Jerry was with me that evening, having gruntingly agreed to go (I suppose his mistress was off somewhere, doing needlepoint). I could read from Soralee's face that she might have wanted more for me, but then of course I might have wanted more for myself. But her disappointment was

nowhere indicated in her conversation, which was lively and cheery and devoted mainly to Jerry, trying to make him become as interesting as he needed to be.

At one point she left us, all sleek and rosy pale in marble jersey, flashing like captive fireflies across that dull, staid ballroom, goosing it into life, taking the pumpkins that decorated the buffet and awarding them to individual tables, stealing a flower from a wreath and putting it behind the ear of a short, uninteresting-looking man, whose cheek she kissed as she whispered something.

"Lionel's here," she said to Ted. "I told him to come over and join us, but he won't, of course, he's already made a conglomerate out of everyone at his table, and he has six more deals to make before dessert. Poor man." For a moment she stopped smiling. "He doesn't know how to have any fun."

"You can't teach the whole world to have fun," Ted said.

"Why not?" said Soralee, and was off again, this time capturing the trio of strolling violinists, beating out a rhythm for their leader, on his lapel, as she hummed something, and he nodded. She looked at him with glowing eyes, and he bowed like the Viennese he was pretending to be, and she curtsied. "Oh, you won't believe this," she said, lighting again at the table. "You'll never believe what I've asked them to play. And they're so happy. I don't think they've ever had a request for it before. They're thrilled that it's my favorite song."

And in a moment, bows raised, the three violinists scratched into "Over There." I cannot hope to describe to you "Over There" as played on three violins. But Soralee started laughing, as we all did, hysterically. Amazed heads turned and looked at the violinists. Soon, quite soon, there were tears streaming down Soralee's face.

"Oh, I can't believe it, they're so sincere and *passionate*, oh God, if we only had some little flags and could start waving them and marching around the floor, oh, can't you see it, the whole place just exploding into an anti-war riot, oh damn, where can we get hold of some little flags?"

The violinists came toward our table, searching her out in her own private glow. They bowed as they played, and looked with obvious pleasure at the tears on her cheeks, as she checked her laughter with grim lips and just continued weeping. "Thank you," she said softly, when they were done. "I've never been so moved." She waited until they were gone to start laughing again.

The people to Ted's left asked him what he did, and Soralee covered her mouth with her hand and whispered to me. "Oh, what does it matter what he *does*, why are people out here so concerned with what you *do*, why don't they just care what you are?"

"I'm with UIM," Ted said. "Executive vice president."

"Very impressive in such a young man," said the middle-aged balding gentleman.

"If he only knew how Ted got the job," Soralee whispered, giggling.

"How did he?" I asked.

"Brains and resources and energy and intelligence and my catching the executive vice president in the den with his accountant's wife. At his own dinner party, for God's sake, in his own apartment, and his wife in the living room. How really dumb. That was when we lived in New York. No one has ever been offered a job in California more quickly. I never would have said anything to anyone but Ted. I didn't want him to accept the offer, but he is as bright as anyone else and he does do the job better than most people would, and he really wanted it, he's very ambitious and I don't blame him, all men are ambitious, aren't they? Oh, well, it's all worked out, I suppose. And I don't mind that we had to move here. Like they say, it's wonderful for the children."

"I've been thinking of selling my airline stock and putting it into a fresh issue," said the man on Ted's left. "If that merger you're talking about does come through, maybe I should buy UIM. How strong are the chances?"

"Better than good," Ted said. "I'm putting most of my salary right back into the company."

"Here's my card." There was his card, extracted from the Gucci wallet. "Why don't you call me at the office, Slater, we'll get together for lunch."

"I'll be happy to," Ted said, examining the raised



embossing. "This next week might be a little busy, the company head's coming in from the East. . . ."

"That's Dave, the dope who feels up accountants' wives in his own den," Soralee whispered. "With Dibsy in the living room. She's a very cute girl, she just happens to have been a hooker, I'm not telling any secrets, she'd tell you herself after one drink. Why do men do that? Divorce the nice Jewish girl for the captivating hooker and once they're married to the captivating hooker go into the den to put their hand up the nice Jewish girl. Are all men like that, or is it just dopey Dave?" Her eyes brightened again as she saw the man she had decorated coming toward the table.

"Where's your flower, Lionel?" she said, scowling. "You should have left it behind your ear, I thought you looked beautiful."

He was far from beautiful. He was a very ordinary man in his late forties, a little overweight, uncomfortable in his tuxedo, and not too at ease with life. I tagged him for a coronary within a year or two, and I'm sure Soralee had already done the same, and that was why she was trying so desperately to get him to relax.

"But you've got to stay," she said, pulling on his arm. "We'll laugh and play and I want you to meet my new friends, look, aren't they lovely, this is Marion and Jerry Dieter, this is my nice friend Lionel Walter, sit down dammit, it's only the ankle of the evening."

"I've got to run," he said, and already his eyes were away from her face, nervously seeking out the entrance

to the hall. "I've got a call coming in at six in the morning, and a meeting at eight, and . . ."

"Oh, who cares," Soralee said, and turned away, hard, on her own disappointment. "Nobody asked for your boring schedule. Go if you have to go."

"Maybe I can just stay for a minute." He smiled, and saw her, and started seeing us. For a few minutes there I almost felt the gripping of his own palms ease a little, as he watched and listened and asked. "Well, I'm off," he said, and he was gone.

"I've got to turn him on," Soralee said, looking after him. "He's such a dear man and he never has any fun. I've got to get him on grass so he'll find out what the moment is."

To me he seemed so ordinary and uninteresting and obviously driven, that I might have wondered at the attention being paid, had the payee been anyone but Soralee. No one she cared about at all was worth anything less than devotion, and as I've already said, the scope of her interest, the areas and people that commanded her attention were so disparate and vast that there should have been nothing surprising in the fact that along with floods and plague and Biafran relief and Panthers and Synanon and Louie of Saks and health food and martinis and Caryl Chessman and her sister, the hippie who had to be fumigated, and writers and painters and movie stars, she could also work up interest and concern for a tired businessman.

She knew better than anyone, of course, how really

tired he was. She knew better than his doctor, and the people who worked for him, and the children he seldom saw, and better than I ever would have if she hadn't told me about him.

They had met, for the first time, at a money-raising dinner for a disease so obscure that, according to Soralee, the sponsors had had difficulty finding a comedian who would front it. Lionel was seated next to them at one of the round banquet tables, and in his tuxedo, looking more dour than usual, resembled nothing more than a basset hound uncomfortably tucked into a formal. She was moved with instant pity for him, because with all the money everyone knew he had, he could never be handsome, and it gave the lie to the whole American dream.

"Cheer up," she said, "things can't be that bad. I'm wearing a pair of your shoes."

"So am I," he answered. "It doesn't make anything better."

He was currently separated from his third wife, who during their marriage had spent several afternoons a week picking up waiters at Frascati's, and wept bitterly at their lawyer's office that Lionel was always chasing girls and the buck. He had not chased a girl since he was nineteen years old, when he found the one person at the prom who couldn't dance either and married her as soon as he could. By the time that marriage was

over, the girls were chasing him, as by then he was a much bigger success than he ever intended becoming: a living, that was all he ever meant to make. Getting through life: that was all he wanted to do.

That a single shoe factory should become part of a nationwide chain to which he was tied, link by link, in gold, astonished and appalled him. A prominent man was supposed to be tall and handsome, with charisma. Charisma, not a buckle and a strap that came up dollars, should drive ladies into a man's arms. That there was, tucked up deep inside him, a fiery and tender soul, was something no woman could ever perceive; so he despised every one of them for the obvious hypocrisy and whoredom of their caresses, as grateful as he was to accept them at the moment. When the moment was over, as he tried to make it be as quickly as possible, so they would have no time to become obviously bored with him, he would return their favors in kind: there was no girl with whom he had ever slept (he revered women too much to use anything but the euphemism, even if it lasted only four minutes on his office couch) who could not go into any one of his eighty-seven branches, in any major city in America, and get a pair of shoes, any time, wholesale. He sent out bulletins to this effect to the branch managers of all his stores, along with the names of the ladies who were to be extended the courtesy. That this might become a source of gossip or scandal in the shoe industry didn't bother him: The shoe industry could do with a little spicing up. That it

could be evidence for his wife to use against him in court bothered him even less: She was entitled to anything she could get, because she was a beautiful woman and he didn't understand why she had put up with him as long as she did.

His appraisal of himself was nothing if not intelligent and honest, he was sure, just as his conduct of his business had been, though why it should have been so successful was beyond him. It was also beyond his mother, who had known from the beginning that it was the other son who would amount to something. His mother was infinitely smarter than he could ever be, and from the time he was a baby had assured him he would never amount to anything, and no one would ever love him. He was pleased that the latter part of her prophecy, at least, had turned out to be correct. The older brother ending up only an insurance salesman, and Lionel being the one to see that she was taken care of, financially, still made him feel somewhat guilty.

But guilt was a very important part of mother love; he knew that even without going to the psychiatrists his contemporaries were visiting to work out their day. His day was worked out. It was busy, that was the important thing, busy from six in the morning, when he started taking calls from his offices in the East, until seven or eight in the evening, as late as he could drag it out to be, so there wouldn't be too much time for thinking. Several evenings a week he could meet with a

salesman in from someplace or other and talk fervently about the future of round or square toes. Other nights he could go to charity dinners, as he was one of the community's greatest philanthropists.

Occasionally, very occasionally, when a night came up empty, he could play with the remote control or read a book he had been meaning to read since the spring before, only he hadn't had time. On these evenings he would fill up a large juice glass with scotch and tell the housekeeper he didn't want to be disturbed, and if anyone called he wasn't in. But his eye would wander away from the printed page and when the light went on on the telephone, he would have to pick it up, soundlessly waiting to hear who was on the other end asking the housekeeper for him, as he fervently hoped it wasn't some bimbo.

Not all of them were. Once in a while a girl who was known to be a "nice" girl was calling because he was available in a town where there weren't too many available men, and she was lonely, the way he would have been if his life weren't so full. Reluctantly, because he had no time for despair, and there was no way her disappointment wouldn't come out eventually, he would make a date with her. He would take her to an overwhelming restaurant, like Perino's, where the food was so expensive he said he loved it because it was obscene, he felt like he was eating money. Then he would take her home, hoping she wouldn't ask him in. She would.

And he would sleep with her, as quickly as possible, and she would tell him how wonderful it had been, while he was putting his socks back on. And he knew again that they were all liars and whores, and he was sorry that a man as smart as himself had been fooled, for even a moment, into thinking she wasn't a bimbo.

"Will I see you again?" the girl would say.

"Yes, sure." Shoes on, then underwear.

"When?"

"I don't know. I'm dead for the rest of this week. Call me at the office."

When she called, he gave the secretary the usual wave, and the secretary said Mr. Walter was on his way out of town, she had no idea when he'd be back. That afternoon the girl would receive a large, expensive arrangement of flowers, with a note tucked inside saying how sorry he was, that she was adorable, and he'd call when he came back. There was also a little embossed card to be presented at any Walter shoe store, in any one of eighty-seven cities, that would entitle the bearer to unlimited shoes, at cost. At the top of the card the girl's name would be engraved in gold, and her name would be sent around the country to his branch managers. Rarely, if ever, would he call the girl again; when he did, he felt little shame at having it be the last minute, and going direct to her apartment, and getting it over with, because that was all the gallantry bimbos deserved.

That any woman could ever fall in love with him

was out of the question; as he had no time for despair, he did not stop to question why. His first wife had loved him a little, but that was because she couldn't dance either, and they had had some laughs, before he got so busy, and the laughter became hollow, and he started wondering how you could make love to a woman when you both were laughing all the time. Shortly after that, they stopped making love, and soon they stopped laughing. They got divorced, and he started getting rich, and became prev to every bimbo around, including the two who paraded as nice girls for long enough to fool him, which meant keeping him out of bed. When he married the second, she told him he was a lousy lay, so he knew he had at last found an honest woman. When she taught him a few things, and he began to practice rituals of erotic tenderness, she told him he was as wonderful a lover as she had ever had. He began to wonder how many lovers she had had, and ended up realizing she was a bimbo.

The third wife he could not even begin thinking about without pain, and he was too busy a man to allow himself pain: He narcotized memory with business and charity affairs, and only when he wasn't writing memos to himself and his branch managers, those rare moments when he sat on the john without a note pad, did his mind ring clear with how docilely she had lain there nightly, waiting for him to bring out his recently acquired bag of sexual tricks, anticipating like a child with an overcharged appraisal of Santa Claus. He was sure he



could never deliver the one present she really wanted, no matter how often she assured him that yes, it had been wonderful for her, too. Not once could he believe in his hungry, oversized soul that he satisfied her. It was good that she had gone to Frascati's. It was only fair, and that was why he hadn't had the detectives follow her, and let her build up all the evidence against him, because a woman that beautiful who put up with a man like him deserved every penny she could get.

As for him, he deserved nothing. ("My God," his mother said, when he handed her her monthly check. "When they called this the land of opportunity, they weren't just kidding, were they, that a man like you could make this kind of success, while your brother, with his looks and his brains. . . .") His becoming a multi-millionaire was one of the great jokes of all time, and he and his mother (the only honest woman he knew) were the two in on it. There was only so much time in life for comedy, life was a serious business, serious business was life, and all the laughter that was going to be expended on Lionel had been guffawed out by a perverse God of Industry. There was no place left for the limited jest of someone loving him. Love required a miracle, and miracles were what made you come out of the box tall and handsome; when you were tall and handsome you did not need a miracle. Miracles were for people with empty heads who still believed something or someone else could do it for them. Lionel had done it all for himself, with only the barest of assists

from his mother. No other woman could fool him, as long as he lived. He hoped none would try.

"You're not laughing," Soralee said at that first dinner, tugging at his arm. The comedian on the podium was beating his elbows on the microphone, screaming out blue-tinted one liners about the mayor, who was also seated on the dais, laughing uproariously at the jokes about his current campaign.

"I hate these things," Lionel said.

"Everybody hates these things," Soralee said. "You're not supposed to say you hate them until they're over, when people read about what a success they were, then your hating it makes you knowledgeable and exceptional. I hope you learn that or we won't be able to take you anywhere."

He smiled and stretched out his hand. "I didn't get your name."

"Soralee."

"That's a weird name."

"I'm a weird girl. But enough about me, let's talk about you."

"I'm very boring."

"Try not to have such a blown-up idea of yourself," Soralee said. "If there's one thing I can't stand, it's an overinflated ego."

In very little time she had him laughing, and soon after that she had him admitting he was lonely, as if

she hadn't known without his saying so, and shortly after that he confessed he hadn't been with a woman socially in a long time, and that was the reason he was behaving so badly, he hoped she would excuse him. She did better than excuse him, naturally: She was on her feet and across the room before he could ask her where she was going, returning in seconds he wasn't able to measure with a redheaded divorcee who would, by the next afternoon, have an exquisite delivery of flowers and an embossed discount card to any of the Walter's shoe stores.

"I don't think he ever called her again," she said when she was telling me about him at lunch. "Poor thing."

"Don't waste your pity on redheaded divorcees," I said. "They know how to take care of themselves better than anyone."

"I don't mean her, I mean Lionel. He drives himself so hard. I'm so afraid he's going to die, just drop dead one day, and he won't have had any fun."

"Well, you can't hope to change somebody his age. They're too set in their ways, and all the damage was done too long ago for you to make it right."

"I know," she said, but even as she said it, I wondered if she did.

That was the last we ever spoke of Lionel. I only saw him one other time, and wouldn't have recognized him, his looks were so anonymous, if he hadn't been sitting with Ted and Soralee. It was an even stuffier fund-raising dinner than the one we had all been together at at the

Hilton: this time the cause was a new center for arts at the university, and the auctioneer wasn't getting nearly the prices for the donated goods he had anticipated. One of the women who headed the committee, a stunningly overdressed matron, was complaining bitterly.

"But, my God," Soralee said, her long lovely hands waving around, "why are you so surprised you're having trouble? People are always passive about art and theatre until it's being taken away. Art is a delicacy, people don't survive on it. When I was at Berkeley there was this big issue in the paper about artichoke apathy. The farmers were raising artichokes and people were apathetic about them, really, that's what it was called, artichoke apathy. Well, you don't just come into life feeling passionate about artichokes, for God's sake. I mean unless someone that you admire sits there elegantly picking, with all that assurance showing *how* it should be eaten, or you're in an Italian restaurant in Rome and some mad Sicilian with dirty fingernails comes over and digs those prickles out, and says, "Eh!" and shows you, look that's a heart! and you eat it because you don't want to offend him, I mean how are you going to know what to do with artichokes or get worked up about them? It just doesn't come bred in, you see. And if you forgive the pun, you can shorten artichoke and you come out with art, and it's the same. Someone has to show you. Someone has to get you excited about it. You don't come flying into life with a

hunger for theatre and music and opera. Someone has to give you the appetite."

The society matron looked at her with great interest. "What a very bright girl you are," she said, as if she had discovered a less than obvious thing, that no one else could see, not even reflected in the admiration in Lionel's tired eyes.

"I have to go," he said, and was on his feet. "I'm expecting a call at . . ."

"Oh, don't . . . Marion!" And she was up, embracing me, introducing me to everyone at the table as her brilliant wonderful friend, telling me that of course I knew Ted and Lionel, who had to run, he was expecting a call. "Well, go," she said to him. "Get out of here, so Marion can sit down."

"Well, maybe I'll stay just a few more minutes," he said, and pulled up an extra chair.

That was the only other time I had seen him, and as I said, we didn't speak of him again. Probably if I had broached the subject Soralee might have told me more about him, but I more or less accepted his appraisal of himself and considered him boring, and there were too many interesting things to talk to Soralee about. At one point when we were discussing women's clubs and charity organization as a way to fill the empty days, Soralee told me in full detail about the Potato Peelers. Apparently they were every bit as efficient and well organized as any other group of clubwomen; the difference was they kept no official membership list. But

every Wednesday afternoon they would go to a restaurant in the Valley for lunch and pick up men. There was an acting secretary who served as telephone clearing house, to make sure the apartments were free. There were five efficiency apartments in all, and four women shared each apartment, chipping in thirty-five dollars apiece each month, the only expense membership involved, unless of course the lunch came up empty and there was no man to pick up the check.

The rules of the club were quite clear: There was no giving out of last names to any of the gentlemen they saw, in case he should try to find one of them at her home, which might put all the members in jeopardy. There was also an unspoken entente that none of the women were to let themselves be with men who were interesting or successful enough to seem more desirable than their husbands, because no one wanted any of these very happy marriages threatened. Men that were more interesting or successful than their husbands were not very likely to be lunching in the Valley. Mostly they were insurance men and small company minor executives or just men whose jobs were never discussed at all. But it always took place on Wednesday, which gave the girls a bit of a giggle, according to Soralee, because that was the day when doctors and lawyers and all the Good Important Men of Beverly Hills took their afternoons off for golf. If the men were so eager to play their Wednesday game, so were the girls.

It all sounded very impersonal and degrading to me, as it did apparently to Soralee. "But how can they do that?" I asked her. "It seems so cold, somehow, as if they were taking their sex like a man. I didn't know women could be like that."

"Neither did I," Soralee said. "Apparently they can. The Potato Peelers do exist."

"But how did you find out about it?"

"One of the girls dropped out due to hot flashes, and I suppose they were looking for someone to kick in that carefree fourth share. A friend of mine asked me if I wanted to join."

"You mean she actually admitted to being a member?"

"She seemed to think it was very sporty and all great fun," Soralee said. "I suppose I disappointed her by not jumping right in. God," she looked away, gulped the end of her second martini, and started chewing on her ice. "God, I never want to be like those women."

"You couldn't be."

"I hope not," she said, and her cheeks were flushed and her lashes were wet and long and caught in thick triangles with no help from Louie of Saks. "I can't imagine anyone feeling that empty."

Neither could I. Not anyone. And especially not Soralee. Soralee with that face and that soul and that wit and that enthusiasm and the candy-box babies whose pictures she only carried when it wouldn't seem too

pushy to show how beautiful they were. My God, not Soralee, she couldn't be like everyone else.

That was why I had to hold my breath, actually hold it in the box of my chest to keep the cry of amazement from leaping free, when she turned the egg timer over at the marathon, and told us all, the people she had never seen before, and me, whom she had seen so very often, and so remarkably clearly, that she wasn't really happy with who she was. When anyone there should have been willing to give the nuts they were so nervous about exposing to be a little more like Soralee.





He stood us in two facing lines in the water, Dr. Simon Herford did, in the shallow end of the pool, semi-kneeling, so the too-warm water played just below our collarbones, and we might have been Miami Beach matrons courting a lazy tan, except that it was evening and there was no sun, and even had there been, it couldn't have penetrated the thick glass enclosure of that poolhouse. I would like to say we had gotten in the water by magic, or some clever filmmaker had made a quick cut and we were all, suddenly, in the pool. But life imitates neither magic nor movies, even as made by Fellini, and there was a hideous interim where we were actually undressing (in separate rooms, men in one, women in the other—Simon didn't want to lend the exercise the quality of a striptease, because that is

sexual, ha!) and loping down to the poolhouse, towels clutched around our shivering nakedness.

I was shivering more than the rest of them, because I was seized with dread at the thought of dropping the towel. Soralee of course flashed into nudity, leapt into the water as if it were a three-course meal; the man who ran the nudist colony paraded around the blue-tiled edge with his socks on, which I regarded as rather funny, in the corner of my mind that was not anesthetized by embarrassment. The young bearded Oregonian who was having as many as three peak experiences a night with his wife hoisted himself out of the water on a rope that dangled from the domed glass ceiling in a woodsy Apollonian display, watched with admiring eyes by the fat middle-aged television executive, who was having no peak experiences at all. The acid genius swam the length of the pool, practicing his annoying yoga breathing in between laps. Trudy who hated penises floated on her slender back, with no consideration whatsoever for those who might despise gigantic breasts. And Simon Herford, like an important Broadway star who had his roles tailor-made, waiting for his entrance until everyone was onstage and talking about him, strode into the glassed-in, overheated arena, marching to the phonograph and setting the needle in place, flooded the house and our senses with Beethoven's *Pastoral*. *Stately, plump Buck Naked*.

And now everyone was in the water but me. I sat by the three-layered tile steps, feet dangling in the water,

holding the towel with what I hoped seemed a casual, loose-fingered attitude, and not as if, as was the case, my life depended upon it. From time to time I have to cover the opening of some new private discotheque, whether or not the magazine, with its incredible politicking, decides to use my articles: At those moments I am never tempted to dance. When I was very young, I was an exceptional dancer, but in those days people danced together, you followed the lead of your partner and I am good at that. But this individual thrusting of pelvises and heads and arms is something I have never tried, and something I do less than well I am damned if I am going to experiment with attempting in public. Soralee assured me once at Bumble's that no one else there knew what they were doing either, that I should just get up and let myself go, and if I was terrible no one would notice because they were all so caught up in themselves and the lighting was bad. But there is something deep in the pit of my stomach that puts a spotlight on me, looking foolish, so I have never tried. It was the same with being naked. My body was no worse than many of the women's—a great deal better, in fact, than most of theirs, except of course for Soralee's. But in my head I could see them all staring at the stretch marks on my breasts, the beginning of those gravitational pulls from the ground as we are drawn inevitably toward burial. I see now that that fearful stomachy spotlight focused attention on me that otherwise might not have existed, but at the time I couldn't

have cared less if I was creating my own problem because I just didn't want to let go of that damned towel.

"Drop it," Simon said.

"No." I have fantastically clever comebacks under pressure.

"I said drop it, bitch."

I was shaking. I really was. I still do when I think about it. Soralee wasn't looking at me, because she didn't want to see my embarrassment, but all the rest of them were, and some of the men were grinning. I was tempted to get into the water, towel and all, simply so I could kick them in the groin.

"George . . ." Simon nodded his head in the direction of old young Oregon woodsy Apollo, and George was coming toward me, out of the water, flashing a dazzling smile made all the whiter by the dark beard surrounding it. Unnaturally white, and too perfect, smacking of Macleans' toothpaste commercials, care-free young men who had deserted the Coca-Cola posters of my teens to go bobsledding into the seventies, loved for the radiance of their teeth. When I say that Simon Herford is intuitive I am not just guessing, because of all of those there he picked the one who would be my soft-spoken, gentle downfall.

Unlike a lot of other women, I cannot take my solace from adultery because my marriage is a disappointment. But before I even admitted to myself it was less than a brilliant marriage, I met a George, only then his name was Al. He wore a face like Kit Carson out of Edgar

Allan Poe, his mustache drooping to the side of his neck where the dark hair grew. He had told his ad agency and his wife to take a flying fuck (his words, not mine, I do not speak that way except in fantasy). He had gifted his sons with individual sets of drums, to break the mind of their mother (laughing, a great manly laugh, tailored to fit the measure of that outrageous mustache). Life was too short, and his eyes were too blue (he made reference to them constantly, as if afraid people wouldn't notice in spite of their being such an accomplishment) for him to see things other than they were, to do different from what he wanted. He was meant to be a troubadour, a spinner of tales, and for the moment at least was surviving as a seller of humorously obscene commodities like douches that came in flavors, which he had launched in the underground press, and from which he was making such a fortune that the magazine had sent me to talk to him and bring the whole thing overground. He was working on getting a franchise from Nestlé for Toll House cookie, which he hoped to market in hygienic syringes.

"With milk," he said, laughing. "With milk would be better. To be eaten at bedtime."

"Over the sink," I said, to share New York-based history, and make him laugh.

"Reading the New York *Daily Mirror*."

He was frightened by Los Angeles, as most first-time visiting New Yorkers are, and knew nobody except his West Coast manufacturers and the weirdo press people,

and now me, and that was good, because sometimes he needed to hear a different drummer. So I brought him along to the restaurant where I was to meet Jerry for dinner because he would be such a treat for him; for both of us.

"You're a very special woman," Al said, while we waited for our second drink and Jerry. It was not an especially good restaurant, but it had red leather upholstery and an oaky air of warm intimacy, and the roast beef was good enough. We liked it, Jerry and I, because we could talk there, comfortably and long. Recently we had begun inviting other couples to make sure there was conversation.

"If you like me," I said, "wait till you meet Jerry."

"You're selling too hard." Al's too-blue eyes cut through to a truth I hadn't known was there, or maybe it hadn't been there before he said it. He took my hand and turned it over, and traced my life line with his index finger. "The book isn't closed on you yet, kid."

By the time Jerry arrived, he was the intruder. He sensed it of course: For the first time in the marriage he had reason to be threatened, and like all men it's all right for them to go tap dancing, but he certainly wasn't about to allow me to do a specialty number. He courted Al with the perverse brilliance he always showed under fire, inviting him over to the house constantly, showing him his paintings, being with him as often as possible, all but literally shoving him down my throat

where I achingly longed for him to be. So whether or not the book wasn't closed on me yet, kid, what might have happened never happened, because Al admitted I was right about my husband, he was a hell of a guy, and besides that his antenna was tuned in to me so strong there was no way Al and I could slip into the Kit Carson sunset, undetected, even for half an hour. A cowardly murderer, that one. Telling me of the bruised bodies and broken homes he had left along the trail. He couldn't do that to me. He would go mad.

"How tempting," the therapist said. I didn't believe strongly in psychotherapy, couldn't afford it, but then I didn't believe in adultery either and preferred being driven for the moment onto a couch rather than into a bed. Or longed to be conducted into the bed, and now that I was afraid I wouldn't be, directed myself onto the couch. "How wonderful of him to offer you at one shot the chance to commit suicide and also drive a man mad. You must be very torn up at missing such an opportunity."

"Do I have to miss it?"

"You're an amateur," the good doctor said. "You can't get into the ring with a pro."

So my one almost expedition into adultery went up in cool flames. After that I managed to get caught up in issues and anguish like women's plight, things that were insoluble, so could command the full focus of my angry energy. He passed from my life, Kit-Edgar-Al, never to reappear until Simon Herford sent him over



to me at the edge of the pool, wearing a full beard now, and going under the name of George, holding his hand out to me in the healthily seductive way such men have, assuring you that there is nothing to fear, no way you will be seduced, because they are so folksy, and as we all know, nothing ever happens in the woods. I gave him my hand and started to cry, not really weeping, because weeping, like nudity, is a little too bald for me; but my eyes stung with fury and embarrassment, as he wordlessly got me to drop the towel and go into the water.

So there we all were, up to our throats in amniotic fluid and memory as Simon gave us over to the trusting wet warmth of infancy or pre-infancy (one pair of hands could never re-create the feeling of being passed like an infant, Simon told us: All those many hands in water could). One by one, eyes closed, they were floated backward toward the last in line, as all along the way supportive hands and fingers beneath skulls and necks arms and torsos, every inch of the body, rocked them slowly back and forth, passed them on as the group inched almost imperceptibly forward and the one at the head received their turn. I deliberately use the incorrect personal pronoun because after a while the different his and her gender ceased to exist. In the warmth, in the soft shimmering of water on flesh, in the touch of skin on skin, men were, at first, circumcised or uncircumcised, bearded or clean-shaven, women were either

small breasted or, like Trudy, monumentally endowed; but as I allowed myself to go with the moment, with the comforting heat and the music and the touch, they ceased to have faces, breasts flattened and became two nipples on neuter chests; eventually even genitals disappeared, and they were all just bodies, housing human beings. It was almost difficult to determine which was Soralee, except that sliding slowly upstream was this grin, this ecstatic unmistakable grin, and in case I needed verification, from the long slender throat came delighted laughter.

And soon it was my turn to be floated. I experienced a momentary flash of apprehension as I tried to plan my behavior. The first in line had kissed, been kissed, reached for hands, had had hands reached for, lingering, trailing fingers, brushing lips. But she had been there before, and knew, while I knew nothing. But knowing didn't matter: not once I began being glided, rocked, losing consciousness of individual hands, giving myself over to feeling, and finding, with unimaginable joy, that I was being sent head right into a slow circle, weightless, reaching, yes, someone kissed me, of course, squeeze back the hand, return the kiss. I was no different from anyone else. No better and no worse. And that was a good thing. That was even a marvelous thing, to be just like everyone else.

I brought myself up short, the world brought me up, my own world, because in the midst of losing myself

completely I was suddenly seized with the overpowering conviction that someone was trying to separate my legs. Victimized woman's paranoia. Of all of those in line, all the bodies, young, old, lovely, slim, fat, they should seize my legs to separate. I was still different. I was mad. Or I had the seeds of madness in me, and that made me different. I reached the end of the line, opened my eyes, and George steadied me, righted me. Groovy, gentle George, helping me find my footing on the floor of the pool, trying to get me to return the honest open pleasure in his face. But I couldn't. The ride had been too short, they had given me less time than the others, because they knew about me. They knew I could never experience unqualified joy because I would forever imagine that someone was trying to open my legs.

"Oh, it was a trip," Soralee said, still with that grin. "Literally a trip."

We were back in the house, in naked closer circle. Simon had confined us to a tighter pen of pillows, within which we sat, shoulders and arms touching. The veterans and newly converted held hands, traced fingers on neighboring knees, leaned cheeks against bare shoulders. I sat cross-legged, hunched, arms tight against the outside of my breasts, trying to look as if it didn't bother me at all.

"You," Trudy said to me. "You, what's your name again?"

"Marion."

"Why were you holding your legs so tight together?"

"What?"

"Simon and I almost broke our arms trying to separate your legs."

"How funny." It really was funny, even though I couldn't laugh. "I thought I was imagining it."

"So why were you holding them so tight together?"

"Why were you trying to separate them?"

"We wanted you to relax."

"I was very relaxed until I thought someone was trying to separate my legs."

"Why should that make you nervous?" Simon asked.

"I didn't realize your motives were so pure."

Soralee started laughing, at me, with me, both, it didn't matter. The girl who had wailed so despairingly at the outset of the marathon was sobbing again, talking about a childhood doll that she and a boy had cut open to find out what was inside, and an ectopic pregnancy, and the overwhelming feeling she experienced in the pool that she was that doll, and she was all mutilated inside, and men had mutilated her. Simon suggested she see him in private session, which seemed a brilliant idea to me, as I really didn't want to hear any more. Nor did I want to hear any further boring apologies from old hairy shipping clerk Nick, with his leaden eyes, weighted to the floor, that Simon kept urging him

to raise. Look at the girls, Nick, was what he kept saying, look at the girls and find the one you want and go after her, why are you always being so sorry? But Nick continued to be sorry because the one he should have liked was fat, chaste, non-masturbating Blessed Virgin Mother Cynthia, because she liked him, he could feel that, and he didn't want her, and he was sorry. The one he wanted was Trudy, a self-defeating wish, because as we all knew through sheer repetition alone, she couldn't stand penises, which she was screaming out again.

All very comic, I suppose. The man who ran the nudist colony had left us for a moment, returning with his undershirt on. I mentioned that he had kept his socks on around the pool, and now here he was, putting on his undershirt.

"Well, what does it matter," he said, "if the important part is hanging out?"

"Why do you consider it the important part?" Soralee said. "I thought that nudity had nothing to do with sexuality, that's what all this is trying to prove, and you run a colony, you ought to be more inured to it than anyone. Why is your penis so important to you, drawing attention to it, I mean?"

"Well, I couldn't do anything without it," he said.

"You could do anything you wanted except fuck and pee," Soralee said. "And I have a genius friend in San Francisco, Dr. Dave, who's working out the inequality of women being able to do that from a separate unit, so I'm sure he could fix it for you. I mean what you

can accomplish in this life shouldn't be determined by whether you have a penis or not."

So there she was, my unwitting ally, subtly a feminist whether she knew it or not, and I was proud of her. "Except," I said. "Except, except. We're so much more vulnerable than men are. You see that, you can really see that, especially naked. It struck me like a hammer how much more vulnerable women are."

"You're wrong, Marion," Soralee said, and her censure was as gentle as her eyes. "I know how much you believe that, how much you need to believe that. But the first time I changed my son's diapers, I saw, I really saw, how terribly exposed and in need of protection little boys are. I mean whatever's been done to us culturally or societally or traditionally, Marion, the physical reality is unmistakable. We're safe, don't you see, our genitals are all tucked in safe inside, and men are so exposed. So pitifully exposed. Little girls are stronger and harder, little boys get sicker more often, they're frail, they need us so much more. That's why mothers get so hung up on their sons. They need us. We've got to stand between them and pain, because pain can be inflicted on them so much more easily."

"You're talking about little boys," I said. "I'm talking about men."

"The best men are some part little boy. That's why they're so touching." Her voice drifted off even as I

wondered at the emotion in it. There was little or nothing of the boy in Ted that I had been able to perceive in all the time I spent with them. Oh yes, he was youthful and athletic, but this childlike vulnerability that she seemed to find so appealing was nowhere apparent in his actions or his attitude. Her enthusiasms were something he tolerated, condoned. The reaching of heart, the public attempt at physical contact were not joined in freely by him. Her hand was always reaching for his, her fingers were constantly searching out his arm and his face; he brushed them away gently, automatically, as if affection, like sheets, were better used in the proper place, at the proper time, probably after the Johnny Carson show. At such moments her spark would seem somewhat diminished, a wave of vaguely recollected sorrow would drown the light of her face (the south of Spain? the faggot movie star? the reward of Beech-Nut gum but not until she had said the Gettysburg Address?).

But if you couldn't kick a man when he was down, or punch a boy child with his genitals exposed, you couldn't keep the life preserver that was Soralee from springing back to the surface. The joke would be made, the dance gone into, the music turned up loud so we could all get lost in the notes, the meal cooked. By Soralee if it was in her house because you couldn't imagine the responses that combined unexpected spices could bring about, and there was no way to teach

that to a housekeeper, no matter how wonderful she was.

She threw herself into her sauces the way she did everything, flinging salt and parsley and oregano from the careless measure of her palm, like a grandmother who had no concern with or knowledge of the existence of cookbooks, going only by taste and the delight on the children's faces. A gourmet chef—"Chefess I suppose you'd want to call me, Marion, what with how unfair it all is"—in addition to everything else. "But what else could I become with those great stuffed cabbage grandma memories, and then my mother wouldn't let me into the kitchen because it might upset her *staff*, she said she could always get another daughter but where could she get another cook.

"I shouldn't have been so hurt, I suppose, now that I'm a mama and I see how impossible it is to get help—there was actually a moment once last week when Carolyn was carrying on so badly I thought Bernice might quit, and I found myself saying to my adorable, my beautiful, my incredible little girl, do you think I overrate her? I don't, even people who aren't her mother think she's remarkable. Anyway, I found myself actually saying to Carolyn she better behave because I could always . . . I bit my tongue in time and forgave my mother. Anyway, there I was, barred from culinary grandeurs in my own home, because it might upset her goddamned cook, let loose finally in Rome with a kitchen of my own. What could I become but the Last



of the Room-Rockers, recipe-wise, considering how lousy the prince would have been in bed.

"The next time you come I'll make you moussakka. Everyone says, even Greeks, I swear, that it's the greatest moussakka they've ever tasted. We'll wait till Ted goes out of town. He loves my lasagna, but certain things he has no real appetite for. Right after we were married I made a ragout d'agneau, two days I worked on it; he came home from the office, that was right before he went to work for Dave when Dave thought we would blackmail him for having his finger up Rosalie Lacey, I swear to God I never told anyone but Ted, and I never would have told anyone else. I wish he hadn't taken the job, but he is happy with his ambition, I suppose, anyway he came home from the office and I had made this incredible ragout d'agneau and he took one look at it and said, 'Slumgullion.' Ted likes scrambled eggs, you see. And steak. Well done, like his mother ruined it. So the next week I made this unbelievable three-day Stroganoff. I marinated the beef and the onions and the mushrooms, I even marinated the wine, and I set it on the table, and he said, 'Ah, creamed slumgullion!' Slightly diminishes the creative flow. Anyway, very sneakily I educated his palate, little by little, so now he really digs glazed Cornish game hens with my sausage and celery and almond stuffing, but certain things like lamb. . . . Well, I made this moussakka, and everybody was fainting over it, they said it was the greatest moussakka they'd ever tasted,

even the Greek, who was there, he said he'd never tasted a finer moussakka and about three o'clock in the morning Ted wakes me up and says, 'You know, that was probably the most magnificent moussakka anybody ever made . . . and it still tasted like shit!'" Laughing, she was at the time chopping some mysterious ingredient for her fried won tons, chopping and laughing. But I wondered if, really.

And I wondered at the marathon. Her pale oval-nailed fingertips played with the dark matted triangles the pool water had coaxed from her lashes, as her thoughts came back from wherever they had been, and she whispered again, "So touching, the little boy in men."

The rest of personal feelings elicited in the pool were exchanged, and exploded from the people around the circle. It was close to midnight, and time for the second step: Animal contact, starting with the "eye-balling" we were to do. Eye to eye, staring into each other's spirits, sniffing each other out like animals, wordlessly, then making our first physical contact, mutely touching; finally, after the touching had been done, words. Words that expressed the feeling achieved in that animal touch.

I would like now to tell you about the contract we all had had to sign, even those of us who were not there for a magazine. Soralee and I had laughed over it very loud and long because there were actually clauses

pledging we would not touch each other's breasts or genitalia; that we would sleep, during the sleeping phase, three feet apart; that anything acceptable in a social situation with clothes on, hugging, kissing, etc., was acceptable at the marathon, naked. But any aspect of physical contact with sexual implications such as petting, the fondling of private parts, and intercourse (sexual implications?) were forbidden.

There was another clause specifying that no last names, addresses or phone numbers were to be exchanged without the permission of Herford, and that those who wished to contact each other after the marathon should wait a week before doing so. This last I considered quite wise, because I sensed from the emotionalism already displayed in the past five hours that one (other than me, of course) could become greatly involved with another human being inside the confines of the marathon, and might experience shock, disappointment, or a shake-up I could not quite anticipate on seeing him outside. The service-station attendant, for instance, the handsome, though not my type, service-station attendant was already showing great signs of interest in me, and as flattered as I was by that obvious, glaring male feedback missing at the moment from my life, I could not imagine feeling anything but embarrassed amusement once we had our clothes back on, and he stood in uniform, filling up my tank and hopping into the front seat of my car to caress me.

The paragraph of the contract that troubled me most

deeply was the agreement to make restitution for any physical damage done during the course of the encounter. Did they mean the breaking of chairs, the breaking of windows, bodies, what? I wanted to ask Simon, but being me, decided to wait and see what would happen, rather than sound a black-thinking, apprehensive fool. I also skipped over in my fear-ridden unconscious the sentence that disclaimed liability on the part of Simon Herford for anything resulting from something for which the participant had granted him permission. The vagueries are those of Simon Herford's agreement, and no reflection of my lack of command of the English language. Something, anything. Those words were his, and the contracts, which I suspected he himself had drawn up; like all great egotists, which it took no untoward perception to see he was, he knew of no reason to draw the line at shaman, psychologist, group leader, Lamont Cranston or God: He was also quite qualified to act as an attorney.

Along with the contract, he had given each participant, prior to the encounter itself, what Soralee and I had dubbed a peak sensitivity list. There were blank lines and numbers after each: "Three things I like to taste are, three things I like to feel, three things I like to smell, three things I like to listen to, etc., are." We had had a great deal of fun with that, because Soralee said it made her realize how little we use our basic senses; off-hand she, even she, couldn't think of three things she liked to feel. "I mean, considering genitalia is out," she

laughed, "according to the contract. Isn't it incredible how anything so hard can be encased in such velvet softness. Oh, velvet, that's a good one, I'll have to bring some velvet."

The purpose of the list was more than just a mental exercise. We were to bring one item we listed from each category, so at that magical moment we had no way of knowing about for sure, but hoped existed, when we were totally under the spell Herford promised without promising to cast, he could barrage us with the sound, the smell, the taste we coveted, and bring us to a state of, there it was, peak sensitivity.

The wind, which Soralee most loved to listen to, could not be brought in a jar. She settled on Toscanini's recording of Richard Strauss's *Don Juan*, the piece she considered closest to musical orgasm ("which we know from the contract is *out*"). The record I chose was infinitely more plebeian, being an old scratched seventy-eight RPM of "My Foolish Heart," which was popular when I was in college and could still weep openly, not only because it was such a patently sentimental song, but also because they ruined Salinger's "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut" by making it into a Susan Hayward movie.

Smell, which was easiest for me, was hardest for Soralee. I immediately chose nutmeg, because it is in my mind more mixed with memory and desire than April: Memory of kitchens and Christmas and eggnog and family, and desire that you will be loved by that

lady as much as she loves the other daughter, and having failed to achieve that, realizing you are too old to fight for it any longer, adjusting to a wish that your children will smell it on you at Thanksgiving when you break down and bake your one pumpkin pie of the year, and love you as much as you loved her.

Soralee could think of no smell that knocked her out, immediately. "Clean new baby," she said. "I do love that. I could bring along Johnson's Baby Powder and have him throw that under my nose, but if you really do get regressed and flashbacks and all I'm not sure I want to go back that far. I mean, what if the baby isn't mine, but me." It worried her for days: The preparation, like everything, demanded her full attention. She had almost decided to forgo smell completely, in favor of three kinds of taste ("I love Mexican food and Chinese and Italian food best, you know, and I have this marvelous friend Verita who has a restaurant where they have sort of chili with mozzarella in egg rolls and she's preparing a plate for me to take along; she can't believe I'm really going naked").

On the way to the marathon she stopped to pick up her platter at New England Village on Santa Monica Boulevard, and coming down the steps with her foil-wrapped food samples, she was beaming. "I remembered," she said. "I just remembered something I love to smell. Do you mind waiting for me here, it won't take me more than ten minutes to go get it, and Verita's

making you a taco. She said you'll need all the energy you can get."

She disappeared for less than a quarter of an hour. I did not ask her where she went. If there was anything Soralee wanted to tell me, or even certain things she didn't, she told. Nor did I ask her then what she had in the envelope, the plain white business envelope folded over with its return address obscured. But she looked enormously pleased with herself; better than pleased with herself, she looked smug. "It's marvelous," she said, not quite being able to clap her hands together because the envelope was clutched so tightly in her left, but managing somehow to convey the feeling that she was clapping hands. "It's so obvious and wonderful, I don't know why it took me so long to think of it."

And she was scooping me out of the restaurant, telling Verita, no, thank you, the food she had didn't need to be reheated, the taste would be there even cold, embracing the tiny chic little Mexican woman and thanking her for all the goodies. "You're an angel. I'll give you a full report."

"I think you're both nuts," Verita said. "For God's sake, be careful."

"Of what?" Soralee said. "Nothing can happen, we've signed a contract."

Contract or not, once the eyeballing began, I wondered if that little Mexican with her peasant wisdom

wasn't smarter than Soralee and I. Sitting cross-legged like that, one to one, kneecaps touching naked kneecaps, even though the man opposite me was the good minister, I was more conscious of my body and his than I was of the look I assumed was trying to tell me something. He smiled at me, and his eyes were leading kindly light. But he had almost no lashes, which made it reverse icing on the cake: naked eyes in addition to everything else. When we had stared at each other long enough he made the first touch contact, reaching for my hand. It was, in his mind, I am sure, the most innocent thing he could have reached for; but unfortunately my hands were resting near my crotch, and I think I jumped a little. Then his fingers were moving gently up and down my arms, and I tried to touch him back with equal friendliness.

"Your hands are cold," he said, breaking the silence.

"I'm sorry."

"You mustn't be frightened. It's a beautiful thing."

"I'm trying to believe that."

"Trust," he said. "Trust Simon. Trust me. Trust people."

"I'm trying that, too."

Our time with each other was over, and he turned to encounter his next partner: I swiveled slightly to face my next one, who happened to be hairy, frightened Nick, who could eyeball with me no more easily than he could look directly at people when it wasn't a



sensitivity exercise. His eyes sunk downward, pupils riveted to the floor.

As long as Nick couldn't look at me, I was pleased not to look at him either, so my eyes went past him and I watched Soralee eyeballing with old woodsy George, whose grin was wide and loving, and whose hands were moving on the back of her neck. Her throat. Her jaw. Her tiny little point of a chin which she didn't admire at all but which George obviously did, holding it in both his palms, lifting it so he could see more clearly the truth in that open face.

"You need tenderness," he said, finally.

"No shit," said Soralee.

I started to laugh but I couldn't laugh long because the girl who felt mutilated inside and was always weeping was weeping again, all the while she was eyeballing me. For the first time it was I who made the gesture, reaching my hand for her shoulder. She placed her palm on the top of my hand and stroked it for a moment, while the tears streamed down her face. It was also I who broke the silence, telling her it was all right, everything would be all right.

"Do you think so?" she said. "Do you really think so?"

"You have to give it a chance to be," I said.

She moved as if to embrace me, and I drew away. By this time girls were embracing girls, men were embracing men, and the opposites were embracing each other, without touching breast or genitalia. But I wasn't ready

for that, yet, I wasn't sure I would ever be ready for embracing a woman, no matter how sexless Simon told us it would be. I suppose like everyone else I have fears of homosexuality, which normal and understandable as they might be, embarrass me. I am private about affection, even when it doesn't involve inner fears: I do not run through the world embracing children merely because they are crying; I restrict my hugs to mine. If my heterosexual barricades were about to be toppled, I preferred to choose my partner, and not just throw myself into a T-group version of Spin the Bottle.

In the past, when I was between serious sexual partners, men would have to wrestle with me, literally wrestle to get me to kiss them good night at the door. Not that I was protecting my early-lost virtue, but goddammit I refused to kiss people unless I wanted to, really wanted to, I do not believe in the sexual amenities. It was not a social or a polite thing for me to kiss someone good night unless I was ready and longing to dive headlong into that mouth and have everything that went along with that act. Unless I was ready for everything, I wanted nothing, so they would hand wrestle me at the door, and I am strong, I'm powerful for a slight woman, and more often than not I would break their spirit before they could break my hold. So I was not about to start embracing women simply because they needed comfort from me. Cop-out, cover-up, I don't care what you call it, I just didn't want to, not just anyone.

Fortunately, for the moment at least, the conflict was avoided, because I shuffled around on my buttocks, and there he was, waiting for me, George. And the eyes were as piercing as any I have seen in my life, only their color differing from Kit-Edgar-Al's, their content exactly the same. Smiles in them. Dreams in them. Gentleness and reassurance and, yes, how lovable I was in them. He wasn't smiling now. His fingers moved to the side of my neck, and they were warm; he worked the anguish loose from the tight muscles around my collarbone. The back of his wrist tilted up toward my face, and I leaned my head so my cheek could touch it. And God, it was soft. So manly, surprising soft. And his fingers were moving up to my face, tracing it, lifting my lids so I would see him, really see him.

"You're so afraid," he whispered. "So afraid."

"You can do better than that, George."

"It isn't a contest, Marion. I'm afraid, too."

I looked into his face and saw that he was, that maybe he was as frightened about himself as a man as I was as a woman. He got up on his haunches, his velvety gold, gently muscled haunches, and reaching for my face with both his hands, cupping it like the flower it had long ago ceased being, drank from it like a loving, stingless bee.

I think, I don't remember for sure, but I think I put my arms around him. I know I kissed him, a little frantically perhaps, bestowing on him a symbolic patch of the passion I had never had a chance to let flower

with Al. But I am not quite sure about putting my arms around him, because I think if I did, he pulled himself free, or I thought if I would, he might try to free himself.

Behind us, next to us, hairy Nick who had apologized for not wanting fat chaste Cynthia, because he didn't like hurting her feelings, was locked in fervent embrace with fat chaste Cynthia. And whether or not he wanted her, and whether or not he feared getting a rod on, a rod on was what he had, as the two of them kissed and hugged and wept because they didn't want each other. I looked at this, stared at it at the time with cold journalistic eye, almost medical I suppose, because the erection was enormous and impressive, no matter how unimpressive Nick was. I really wanted to see it, and what would become of it. I also wanted to forget how seriously I had been shaken by that terribly tender, surreptitiously loving moment with George. When you look at how obscenely funny an erection with which you are not involved is, attached to someone you have no feeling for, it is easier to forget about the one you hoped would be there, knowing there was no sensible, logical, or moral thing that could be done with it, especially under the circumstances.

Somebody was screaming. I turned, sharply, freed from the eyeballing, loosed from my personal confusion. Trudy, her great breasts bobbing around like helium balloons attached to a thread that could not possibly hold them, was flailing around on her back, her wrists

pinioned to the floor, as the genius acid freak straddled her, rubbing his flaccid penis up and down and across her belly. She was screaming obscenities and yelling for Simon to get him off her, what the fuck was the matter with him, why didn't he do something? What Simon did was bob anxiously, grinningly around them, like a rooting enthusiastic bettor in a cock fight, urging his rooster to yes, good, move in, that's right, keep it up. When she shattered our ears with sobbing, Simon pulled the man away.

"All right," he said to Trudy, cradling her in naked arms, "all right. Now talk about it. Talk about it."

"You know how I feel. You know how I hate them. Why did you let it touch me? Why did you let him keep touching me with it?"

"What did you feel?"

"I wanted to die. I wanted to throw up and die."

"But he wasn't trying to get in you, Trudy. I wouldn't have let him get in you."

"But he was touching me with it. Why did you let it touch me?" She was shuddering and gagging and I had to look away.

Later, when I could hold hands with everyone, even Trudy, I asked her how she could have put up with such indignity. "But you don't understand, do you?" she said, and she was smiling. "You don't understand at all. Simon's saving me. When he found me I was in the hospital, and I had just tried killing myself for the third time. He's saving me, don't you see?"

"I thought he was degrading you."

"But you're ridiculous," she said. "I finally want to be alive. There are some things that make me sick, but at least I don't want to be dead any more. I'm learning how to be alive. He's teaching me."

"And what about your husband?" It was her second marriage, and I wondered what they did in bed, or if he had to spend all his time hiding it from her.

"Simon's teaching him too. He comes to a different group."

"Do you have any idea why you feel the way you do about men?"

"Oh, I have nothing against men," she said. "I like men. I just can't stand penises. They're so disgusting looking and they feel so icky, why should I like them?"

"I think they feel lovely," Soralee said.

"Well," Trudy shrugged her shoulders, and the great breasts bounced, "that's your problem."

Simon had made the circle tighter, by pushing the multicolored pillows even closer together, so that there was only a small free area in the center of the yellow carpet. We were all on our feet now, waiting. "Just keep milling around now, mill around to the music, keep moving and forget that the object is skin contact. But let yourself have it. Just mill and get skin contact, moving and letting what touches, touch. Hands at your sides. Anybody who moves around like this," Simon held his palms up in front of him in mock static feeling for breasts, "or like this," he groped the air at

genital level, "gets their ass kicked in." The group laughed.

Then the music was on, and the lights were out, except for a dim candlelike glow from four corners of the floor, and we were moving, and flesh was touching flesh, anonymous and cool, as I moved, timidly at first and then began turning, going in opposite directions, even at one point (could I smell which one was George) cutting across the center of the ring, cutting through, as arms touched mine, and shoulders and buttocks and breasts brushed by me. All of it felt good. As a matter of warm fact, it felt wonderful.

Simon turned on a strobe light: It began flashing, slowly at first, giving us staccato glimpses of faces and bodies moving by. He turned up the frequency, and it was mad, wild and mad, as if the roomful of bodies were a psychedelic play staged by a clever director for my benefit, to make it all seem more interesting than it was; and they were in league, the cast, to jerk and twist and move their bodies like puppets, part by part, abrupt, breast severed from chest, heads divorced from necks. Shattered, epileptic.

And now the music was up full, pounding, the lights were flashing full speed, and Simon was screaming, "Dance," and they were, they were all dancing, alone, with each other, in threes, in one, and I might have been at Bumbles, except that they were naked, and my God, I was dancing too. Even me. I could see Soralee, her arms flailing rhythmically, crazily above her head,

and she was laughing. Laughing aloud, and free. I was not that free, but I was moving. I was actually moving. I was having a damned good time. I was dancing with George and it didn't matter that I'm not quite sure how to move because I was moving, and in that now-and-then light I couldn't look a fool because I didn't feel like one.

"Oh, wow," Soralee said, puffing, falling face down on a pillow when the music was over and the regular lights were back on, but not too brightly. "That was fantastic. I feel stoned. Absolutely stoned. When do we get to have dinner, I'm starving!"

"There's some apples and cookies over on the sideboard," Simon's assistant said.

"I don't want apples and cookies, I want something to eat. I'm starving."

"That's psychic hunger," said Simon.

"You're out of your bird," Soralee said, and was on her feet, moving toward the kitchen. "I've been psychically hungry for thirty-two years. Right now I happen to be starving."

"You can have apples and cookies," he said.

"Apples and cookies, it's just like camp." She flashed him a smile, excusing him. "Summer, I mean, not high." She signaled to me to follow and disappeared into the bedroom. When I got there she was on her hands and knees, ferreting out the foil-wrapped tray from beneath her clothes. "Thank God for Verita," she was into it and eating and offering. "I don't mean to



leave them all out of it, but she didn't prepare for twenty. Oh God, taste this carnita, its unbelievable."

George's head was in the doorway. "Simon says to please come back out immediately, there's to be no subgrouping."

"Subgrouping, my ass," said Soralee, biting and chewing. "We're fighting off starvation. You want one? They're cold but they're unbelievable."

"No, thank you," said George. "I've had dinner."

"Well, somebody should have told us to eat before we got here. We've been here since six. Chocolate chip cookies and apples, for God's sake. The man must be making a bloody fortune from this marathon. Eighty dollars apiece for twenty hours, it's one-thirty in the morning and he serves chocolate chip cookies and apples. That's got to be ninety-nine point eight per cent profit. You're not eating, Marion."

"We better get back," I said. George was in the doorway, looking displeased with me. Heterosexual attraction was apparently still more authoritative than even the lure of Soralee.

"Well, there goes my peak sensitivity taste, all to hell," she said, licking her fingers, wiping them on the bottom of the fringed bedspread. "Do you think it will be enough, sound and smell? Oh God, I hope it will be enough, where's my smell, where did I put it?" Scrambling under clothes and other people's underwear for her purse, "You don't suppose anybody would scoff my smell, oh good, here it is, thank God." The

envelope was clutched in her hand, pressed to her heart, tucked in the suddenly manufactured crevice between pressed-in arm and breast. "I'll tell you one thing about all this, it isn't easy to find pockets."

We were back in the other room. The lights were lowered again and Simon was explaining we were about to enter the meditational phase of the experiment. Soralee was listening, but some part of her attention was distracted as she fingered the envelope thoughtfully, opened it a little, peered in to make sure whatever was inside was intact, held it up to her nose, and smelled. She lowered her lids, and breathed in deeply; when her eyes were open again I thought I could see tears in them.

There had been a great many tears that evening, and there were to be a great many more, especially that night, and much of the following day. But those were understandable tears, tears of grief and pain and joy, exorcised like a black spirit. Soralee's tears were wistful, hungry tears, and if she had been psychically hungry for thirty-two years, her appetite was far from satisfied. People were listening to Simon and laughing when he was funny, which he was now and again, and hugging each other when he told them not to be afraid of affection. Soralee was hugging people too, and letting herself be hugged, but in between she sniffed the magical ingredient in that envelope and went far away into herself, recovering from time to time to join in an embrace. She embraced Trudy, and George and fat chaste

Cynthia, and the man from the nudist colony who let the important part show.

But she pulled away, almost as if she had received a physical shock when the middle-aged, overweight television executive tried to touch her. It puzzled me and troubled me that she should choose the least offensive in the group, by sheer virtue of his ordinary, overweight anonymity, to pull away from. I couldn't ask her about it then, because George's hand was on my wrist, and Simon was explaining about the pain, and I had missed the first part of it by wondering about Sorallee.

"... Grief and rage stored up in us. Here," he pointed to his jaw. "Where the little child quivers and holds it in until he can get to Mama, and WAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—let it out. As we grow older we begin to hold it back and in, and it's all packed up in here." The jaw again, the muscles of the throat. "I intend to get that out."

The minister was smiling, as was the woman from his congregation, who was half-lying on her pillow and resting her head and shoulders on his chest. His arms were around her, but a lot of people's arms were around each other, and I wasn't nervous about Pasadena being rocked to the foundation of its church once they were back there with their clothes on. I was, however, a little worried for the middle-aged woman whose husband had left her just as she reached menopause, who was cradled in the handsome embrace of the gas station attendant. The realities were, once she left the group,

the anguish would be greater for the void that had momentarily been filled, if only on the outside of her arms.

"Then there's the deeper pain," Simon was saying. "The pain that we swallow from here, ugh," clunk, as if it were a ball bearing, passing down the canyon of his esophagus, "that gets so deep down inside it hits gut level," a punch to his plump Santa Claus belly, "and that's stored so deep, that's hidden so hard and so tight that we might never get it out and up. But I intend to get it. I intend to go for it and get it out." His eyes were sparkling, an easy word, too loosely and too often used, to describe eyes. But sparkling was what Simon's eyes were, as he contemplated moving us to what. . . . Ecstasy? Freedom? Nirvana? I wasn't sure, but I knew he could hardly wait. Whatever it was, if it made his eyes sparkle, it made his mouth water, though I could not verify that reality as easily as his eyes.

"And I'm not going to kid you, it's real pain, and it hurts, like real pain does. But the only way to rip out the grief and the rage is to attack it at its root, and that's what I'm going to do. Get the cries out. Get the screams out in the open. Now how many of you here have been through the pain before?" Seven hands were raised. "Good, very good. How many of you would be unwilling to go through it again?" No hands.

"Fine," said Simon. "Fine. So the rest of you see

there's nothing to be afraid of. And the one word, the only word you'll be allowed to say once we go into the silence, until I declare the silence over, and I won't say that until after we go through the water tomorrow, is 'Stop.' You will be able to say 'Stop.' If it's too much for you, remember you can tell me to 'Stop.' But I advise you not to say it unless you really want me to stop, because what you're going to get to is a level of understanding of yourself and life, and what's inside you and the universe that you'll never have gotten to before. That's what's been happening here at these marathons, and that's what you're going to be part of tomorrow. But if you're going to go with it, go with it all the way. Don't say that 'Stop' unless you absolutely have to. There will be no talking at all, no matter what happens, the only one who will be allowed to say anything is me, until I declare the silence over. Let yourself go with it. You may have flashbacks, you may have insights some of you didn't realize you could have, you may be regressed all the way back, and if you are, go with it, see what you find there. But no talking. I know that will be a little hard on some of you oral diarrhetics, but keep your goddamn mouths closed. If you have to say something, if you can't keep your loose spirit in for those hours, if you absolutely must talk, then ask me for a piece of paper and a pencil, and write it down.

"OK. One other thing. When it's happening in the pool, when you're floating and we get your own special music—all of you have given your records to George to

label for you, I assume, along with your personal sensitivity kits—”

“My smell,” Soralee said. “I gave him my record, but I ate my taste, and I didn’t give him my smell.”

“Well, give it to him now,” Simon said.

“Can’t I keep it?” she said. “Isn’t it all right to keep it till it’s time?” Envelope clutched to her breast, a child with a ruined world’s last lollipop.

“All right, keep it, but don’t forget to give it to George in the morning. Anyway,” eyes back to the group, “when it’s all happening in the pool, and I get each of you all the way back, I’ve noticed a tendency of some of you to infanticize a little. So last marathon we started giving some of the participants a baby bottle.”

“I drank two of them,” Cynthia said, giggling. “And I cried when Simon tried to pull it away.”

“Anyhow, I noticed that the usual baby nipple is a little small for the adult mouth, and some of you really greedy ones had trouble keeping it in to your own satisfaction. So what I’ve done for this marathon is to get a more logical size, what I’ve come up with are the rubber nipples they use to feed baby calves whose mothers can’t accommodate them. . . . These nipples are more like it, more fitting for the grown-up mouth. One thing about them, though, I noticed, they look a little like a penis. Trudy ought to like that.”

Beside him Trudy shuddered, retched dryly, and then laughed.

A cool wind traveling southward, a pilgrim in search of the sea, lost in the maze of mountain and canyon surrounding us, rattled the tiny slats of bamboo shade on the window. Soralee looked up as if the noise were a greeting from an old friend, a puzzled look on her pink face, because she could not offhand think of his name, but was willing nonetheless to make him feel welcome. She opened her arms and stretched them high over her head, and the great long body trembled with acceptance, renewing itself in the sound and the sudden chill invading the room. I on the other hand went for my blanket, a fuzzy multicolored woolen afghan that my husband and I used to carry to football games, when we still could get enthusiastic about such things and each other. When I returned to the circle George had his arm around weeping Annie, and seized with unreasonable jealousy and disappointment that he cared as much for those who reveled in their inner mutilation as those who more healthily manufactured heavy scar tissue, I went and sat by Soralee.

"Hey, old pal," she said softly over Herford's droning sitar music, which he had put on the phonograph, "you having any fun?"

"It's fascinating," I said.

"You ought to run away with George. For a little while, anyway."

"He's very young, and that was not the purpose of this exercise. When we get back to the flats, we'll have our civilized minds back."

"Maybe that's not the purpose of the exercise either." Her eyes were gone again, as she inhaled deeply from the pouch of the envelope.

"What's in that?" I asked her.

"My life," she said. "Elixir of survival."

It was not like Soralee to talk in abstracts or keep things hidden, so I assumed she was telling me no less than the total truth. Nor was she a secretive girl: Women of mystery, she told me once, should be put in a crypt with Rudolph Valentino, or stood in glass cases to decorate the lobby of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The beauty of women, the real beauty, was that they, and they alone, could be totally open. Men had to protect some degree of their privacy, along with their parts.

There is a flower that blooms in Southern California, and I believe nowhere else, at least I have seen it nowhere else, called the gazania. It is a very fancy name for a very simple flower, which looks quite like a daisy, except that the most striking specimens grow in a breathtakingly vivid shade of burnt orange. They grow in great clumps, wild on hillsides, and are usually uprooted when they spring up uninvited by the flatland ladies who court Japanese gardeners like visiting celebrities, glorying no less in getting the more well-known ones to come to their houses and keep their gardens unique and manicured. Soralee's house was surrounded by gazanias, deliberately planted when not enough appeared on their own. She loved them because they were like no other flower in the world, as much



as some people might have mistaken them for ordinary daisies. A gazania, she said, was like a woman: When it felt the warmth from the sun, it began to open; when the heat and the light were full, the petals were wide. The moment the flower fell into shadow, or the air began to cool, the petals began to close, so by twilight it appeared nothing more than a scruffy weed with eight little prickles.

"Do you see, Marion," she said to me once, "it's just like a woman. With love. I don't just mean the sexual part of us, though God knows it reacts just like a vagina, with erotic courting, I mean all parts of us. The warmth is irresistible, don't you see, you shine the light on us and we have to glow back, we have to give out everything we have, and if no one wants it, we close up, and look quite ugly and ordinary. But the miracle is that the potential for giving beauty is there all over again the next day, no matter how cold it was the night before. That's what you ought to take pride in. That's what you ought to get courage from. You're a gazania. No man in the world can make that claim."

Herford had put a recording of Alan Watts on the phonograph, and the maundering voice was advising us how to achieve karma or some similar state of mystic awareness. Soralee was looking skeptical and eager. I had seen her looking both on a number of occasions, most recently an ESP display by a psychic from Utah

who was giving a performance at the home of a friend who consulted Peter Hurkos to find out if her husband was being unfaithful. She was obviously ambivalent about the blindfolded clairvoyant ("Well, of course his answers are frighteningly accurate, Marion, but if he's a true psychic why does he charge so much money for a private reading, did you see how hooked those poor women got, they couldn't wait to go pay him a hundred dollars for a half hour, that's supposed to diminish your power, you know, being greedy") just as she was not too sure about astrologers ("Although I do have this one friend, Cleo in Detroit, who's fantastic: She's a very groovy lady, she just happens to be an astrologer. If she hadn't done that, she probably would've become a cowgirl or Joan Baez").

Soralee did seem to believe that there was an extra sense people were born with that most of them didn't develop or allowed to be submerged under layers of logic and education. She would have been very happy, I felt, to go get a reading, if it wouldn't have meant joining the well-coiffed faceless brigade, fast becoming an army, of anxious women wanting to be told *definitely* what to do ("Sort of your seventies' substitute for the confessional," Soralee said, "sixteen *mea culpas* and you're good again, everything will turn out all right").

She was looking the same way as the marathon continued, wanting to believe, unbelieving, cheeks flushed almost crimson, as if she had just scrubbed her face

again, longing for a glow to touch her from beyond or at least from the content of the record. "Peace," went the slightly sibilant voice. "Uninvolvement. Perfect bliss. Peace, uninvolvement, perfect bliss."

"But he's wrong," she whispered. "Don't you see that? He's wrong. Perfect bliss can't be uninvolvement, or there's no point in being alive. You can't be uninvolvement and know what bliss is, not today, not with the world the way it is. Unless you're stoned out of your mind all the time. You have to care."

"No subgrouping," Herford said loudly. "Just shut up and listen."

"I don't know how to do that," Soralee said aloud. "Not if I disagree."

"Then learn. And grow. That's what this is, is a growth process. If you have any objection, wait until tomorrow, and we'll talk about it."

"I can't wait till tomorrow. By tomorrow somebody may be dead." Her arms were clasping her naked thighs and her cheek was tight in against her knee, and she might have been back on that hill outside San Quentin, for the anguish in her eyes.

"Just shut up, you're interfering with other people's thing."

"Well, I wouldn't want to do that."

"This isn't just for you," Herford said angrily.

"I know," Soralee whispered, smiling. "He died for all of us."

She had told me once, in full detail, as she told all stories she promised to tell, about the Chessman vigil. The night before the execution she and a few of her Berkeley friends went over to wait outside the prison, as part of the protest, while the radio announced that thousands of students were arriving, and all the time there were only about six of them left. By three o'clock in the morning it was freezing on that hill, a naked hill with little grass and no trees, and a bone-chilling wind blowing off of the water. "Mothers with babies in their arms are coming," the radio said, but according to Soralee there was only one mother, and she was using the execution as a cover to be with her lover, a young man who was hanging the Governor in effigy.

"The sound truck was running out of money," Soralee told me. "They kept trying to raise money from the people who were left to keep their batteries going or something, and this diminishing loudspeaker at the top kept blaring, ever more faintly, 'Please don't leave, ladies and gentlemen, any minute Marlon Brando is coming, and we're expecting Steve Allen and Shirley MacLaine.' Finally, about four, four-thirty in the morning, Brando did come—there was one girl who had waited there all night because it was her life's ambition to screw Marlon Brando—I mean, the point was, everybody was *using* it, using the experience for whatever *they* wanted, and all the time nobody was giving a thought to what was going on inside, you see, nobody seemed to remember that inside that prison a man was going to *die*. I didn't

even know I was involved, at least I hadn't been involved when I got there, I just went as an observer, with my Kerou-wacky friends, but I started going crazy because nobody was thinking about Chessman.

"There was an old madam, very famous in San Francisco, who used to run the town's best bordello, and she's sitting in the back of this chauffeured limousine passing bourbon to the cops—oh, there were plenty of cops to deal with the thousands of students who were supposed to be arriving—and a group of three boys with guitars came and started singing folk and union and protest songs because they were hoping for a booking at Enrico's Hungry I.

"Finally around seven in the morning Brando gets up in front of the microphone—they managed to restore the sound system in the truck—and tells us something like 'Even at this moment my attorneys are working to find a loophole and I'm sure they'll find one. But just in case they are unsuccessful I've met with the attorneys for Caryl Chessman, and he's agreed to let me play him in a motion picture based on his life.' His *life*, Marion, and Brando's there making it into a movie. I really wanted to kill him, and I used to love him so, didn't everyone. Only then the sandwich truck arrives with food and coffee and Hershey bars, and people start coming in bunches because it's morning, and it's warmer and Chessman's scheduled to die at eight o'clock. They're hanging around eating sandwiches, being photographed by a man from *Paris Match*, and it comes over the tran-

sistor radio we're carrying, 'They're dropping the pellets, ladies and gentleman,' like they were lining up at the starting gate at Santa Anita. And he was dead, that was it, he was dead, and nobody there was really involved, you see, for all their involvement. Nobody seemed concerned that a man had just breathed his final gulp of air, and it was poisoned. Maybe you should write it, Marion, Stanley Kubrick could make it into a musical.

"It's so funny, black funny I mean. I told it to my shrink and he said it sounded like the crucifixion; I asked him if he thought they had sandwich trucks at the crucifixion, and he said probably. People were tired. People were hungry. They had to eat, and nobody wanted to go home."

"Doesn't it make you nervous?" I asked her, "using your hour to tell him stories. I don't know about you, but the few times I've been on the couch I couldn't get my own problems out fast enough because of what it was costing."

"Well, somebody else's story isn't necessarily irrelevant to your own, you see, if it really bothers you. Capital punishment. Personal punishment. Dr. Rady says they're very tightly connected. The fact that we can always find an executioner."

Looking at her now, angry but smiling, insisting on speaking when we weren't supposed to speak, shrouding herself with caution in spite of the nakedness, challenging Simon Herford in the middle of his own arena, I

wondered if there was something personal she wanted to be punished for, and if so, if she had deliberately chosen Simon Herford. Or let me choose him for her. It was, I was sure, a foolish thought, because there was no job that needed doing that Soralee wouldn't take on herself, including the rapping of her own knuckles, if they needed to be rapped, which I couldn't imagine to be the case. And yet she had told us all, my friend who loved gazanias, that something was making her petals close. With the chill whispering against our naked bodies, I could see her open acceptance visibly diminishing, as she covered herself with the veiled doubts I usually wore.

She listened to the droning. "Peace. Uninvolvement. Perfect bliss."

"Bullshit," Soralee finally said.

"Shut up," said Simon Herford.

In the corner, Cynthia was sobbing, and Trudy was comforting her. Simon turned off the lights and lit a candle, the flickering glow of which we were to concentrate on while the repetitious same five notes of the sitar penetrated our unconscious, and brought us to where we needed to be to begin the silence. It was two-thirty. We could sleep till six. Some last-minute instructions: Those who were assigned to make the breakfast, let it be understood clearly now so there would be no need for words in the morning, get up when you hear the music and make your appointed rounds, Trudy on Maxim, Soralee on rolls, George on juice. "And now,

begins the most important phase," Simon said, bringing in a tray of tiny glasses and a bottle of sherry, with which we were to make our sacramental good night.

Soralee was on her feet, and I could hear the angry slamming of the bathroom door. I followed her, of course, because I had never seen her so upset, and she was there because of me, no matter what she had said in her egg-timed confession.

There was no lock. I opened the door slowly and found her huddled over the too-low sink, splashing her face over and over again with cold water, rubbing her cheeks as if to take the heat from them, making them all the redder, so they looked on fire. The envelope was on the window sill in front of her.

"What's wrong?" I said. "Please tell me what's wrong."

"Paul Masson sherry," she said into the fountain she was making with her hands. "A dollar sixty-nine a bottle. The man is making a fortune."

"What's really wrong?" I said.

"I'm so afraid I won't be able to sleep." She wiped her face on the bottom of a terry-cloth bathrobe draped over the stall shower. "I haven't been to sleep for over a year without drinking myself into it or taking a pill. What if I can't sleep, Marion?"

"You'll sleep," I said, roles fully exchanged now; because for as long as I had known her it was Soralee who had been assuring me, her confused friend who could never drop into dreams this side of stupor, numbed by



tranquilizers and too many shots of scotch, administered at bedtime like medicine, to get through the night, so maybe, only maybe, I could get through the following day. It had never occurred to me in all that time that Soralee might have trouble sleeping.

"I'm terrified it will get to me," she said. "I've got so many doubts about what's going on in there, but it's turning me on, and I'm so afraid he may be a charlatan. What if he is and I let it get to me?"

"Just relax. Please. Let it get to you. Maybe you'll find out something."

"What if it's the wrong thing?" she said. "What if I let it get to me, and I see the truth? What if all this basic, ritualistic crap really works, and I find the answer, and it's the wrong one? What'll I do?" She reached for the envelope and clutched it in whitening knuckles. "What'll I do?"

"You'll do the intelligent thing, the way you always have."

"Oh, my darling friend," she said, and put her arms around me. "You don't really know me at all, do you?"

There was a rap on the door. "No subgrouping," someone said.

"Go fuck yourself," said Soralee in elegant tones, and wiping her eyes, followed me docilely into the other room.

"Now that we're all here," said Simon pointedly, "we can begin the silence. Remember, nobody is to speak again except me, until I announce tomorrow that

the silence is ended. The only word you will be able to say is 'Stop.' If you absolutely must say something, signal for a piece of paper and a pencil."

I had no idea how funny this last was to be. I didn't understand, as impressed as I was with his brisk, clever leadership, quite the power this man could exercise over people. The control. The five notes repeated over and over again on the sitar recording were having their effect. The television executive was sobbing with happy tears. The minister was plaiting the hair of mutilated-inside Annie. George was lying face down on the rug, his beautiful shoulders heaving. And beside me, almost inaudibly, Soralee was making the sitar music into a base, as she hummed "Taps" through her nose. Of course. Anything that could be converted into comedy could not touch you, as deeply as you needed to be touched.

"Apples and cookies, it's just like camp," she had said, and camp was what she was converting it into. Summer, not high. Taps. The single light of the candle flame was magically transformed by the notes issuing through her nose into a campfire, and we all might have been thirteen and roasting marshmallows under the supervision of those fine athletic sweat-shirted dykes summer-instructing in the Poconos. Except that we were coed and naked under the arrogant, controlling eyes of Simon Herford, toasting each other with sacramental sherry, a dollar sixty-nine a bottle. Soralee drained her glass and thoughtfully carried the tray into the kitchen. Before she

turned off the light, I saw her finishing off the dregs in the other glasses.

The candle was blown out. We moved to our appointed places, three feet apart. Those who had brought sleeping bags dragged them to the terrace outside and nodded good nights, exchanged mute embraces, kissed, and slept. I curled myself into the least offensive embryonic position on the soft yellow carpet, and covered my body with that multicolored, happier-remembered afghan. A naked foot stepped on my hand. I did not cry out in pain, nor did the possessor of the foot say he was sorry. We pulled away from our mutual discomfiture and exchanged glances that held both the recrimination and the apology. We were on silence. Simon had told us so.

The full humor of this, as I said, did not strike me until the next morning. We were awakened at 6 A.M. to the blaring of a Brandenburg Concerto, and I turned around, adjusting my consciousness and my eyes. Soralee was looking at them all, hearing the music, and smiling (where was she, Naked Tanglewood?). And in the midst of toothbrushing in the kitchen sink, hasty preparation of breakfast (Soralee touched my arm and pointed to the package of coffee cake; Thriftmart—59¢ marked down to 47¢—“he’s making a *fortune*,” she mouthed) in the middle of all this, as I waited my crowded turn at the toilet, Henry, the overweight little

television executive came scrambling in from the terrace outside, signaling frantically to Simon for a pencil.

Simon rolled his eyes heavenward, as if to say, "My God, I had to get one of those," and went reluctantly to search out a piece of paper. Henry followed like a little boy, biting his lips and chewing on the soft inner part of his thumb; I followed, too, because I am a dedicated reporter and also do not know how to or care to mind my own business. Simon handed him the pencil, and Henry anxiously scrawled, "I have just been bitten by a rattlesnake."

My God. Talk about power. That the man would not scream, or say, "Help me," or "Please call the fire department," or even, the poor bastard, "Ouch." Momentary concern, a flash of it only, appeared on Simon's white-fox-hatted face, moderated by wisdom and skepticism and total awareness of what needed to be done if the man were indeed telling the truth. It was the truth. We followed him out to the terrace, the four of us who were not busy with breakfast and brushing and fighting silently for a turn at the john; the rest had, apparently, not noticed.

Henry pointed to his sleeping bag, and out from beneath the olive camouflage skittered a baby rattlesnake, probably as frightened and disoriented as his victim, and unlike him, without the ability to speak his fear, though that silence had been ordained by God, as opposed to Simon. As leagued with Simon? I wasn't sure, but it didn't matter because Simon became in that

imperceptible fat-man flash, Avenger (the rattlesnake was slain with the batting of a shoe), Medicine Man (a rattlesnake kit was gotten from the back of his car, and frightened Henry's big toe was administered to, cross-cut, sucked from and bandaged), and Sister Kenny ("It's all right to go into the pool, I don't think it really broke the skin, but there's no point in taking chances, if you feel at all funny, tell me, and you better stay out of the highly physical stuff"). Simon was of course allowed to say that in words, because those were the ground rules. I could only mentally think, oh my God. And the bitten man, I suppose, could only silently pray.

Extraordinary. I think about it now and wonder why I didn't run screaming down that canyon, naked as I was, waving my arms in frantic signal to the cars that wouldn't be passing by, because we were miles from any semithoroughfare, miles even from the faintly carved-out treacherous mountain road that perhaps one car risked every few hours, and that one probably driven by someone lost or wanting to be. I wonder why I didn't punch out at Simon, strike him with my fists as I would have, have done, struck my husband with my purse when I felt threatened and defeated, and he was driving too fast, putting us both in danger by being drunk and refusing to relinquish the wheel, because it wouldn't be seemly, it wouldn't be manly to let the woman drive even though it might mean survival.

But these are the feelings, these are the disbeliefs, the anxious horror I experience now, in retrospect, and

in view of what happened. Emotion recollected in hostility. At the time I felt none of it: I was quite willing, actively willing to accept the isolation and danger he had put us all into, physically, to take us away from the world, and the spiritual, emotional demands he was to make on us all—to free our beings, to explore them, explode them, to make our inner worlds more complete.

A snakebite. Good God. In that tribal encampment where we dwelled all those eons ago, memories of which Simon Herford could soundlessly begin to stir, would, fully intended to, why a snakebite must have been as common as a sneeze. No need to send for the doctor, when the shaman, well, he was more qualified to crosscut, suck and send you on your way than some big mucky-muck upriver, who would probably ask for beads. We had all been together in the warmth, in the wetness, in the swirling piece of weightless memory we hadn't known was inside our heads until we started being rocked and touched and passed like babies; we had danced together to the music, in the flashing light, and had toasted our way to peace and nirvana. And had slept without pills or pot or booze. Oh, maybe there had been a little piece of incense, and some repetitious faintly hypnotic spell innocently cast. Maybe we were even narcotized by the feel of all that flesh.

But to be less than willing to submit to the dictates of that fine atavistic leader? Less than eager to put ourselves under his control? Why, at the moment, that would have seemed madness, because he was giving

us all that the world outside was busily taking away. Family, love, interpersonal growth. And feeling. So early in the morning, with the sun barely risen, on a flagstone terrace by a still-night-cooled shaggy cliff, naked as the jaybird I had never allowed myself to be, I felt sun-baked and warm, as I never felt at home in bed, with my nightgown on and the thermostat in full accord with my needs. Challenge him? I would have been out of my mind, the one I had at the moment, to suggest he was doing anything wrong. Who knows what evil lurks in the fangs of snakes. The Shadow do.

In the envelope tight in her hand, in the envelope she had clutched through the night, breathed from, gained sustenance from, tripped back, beaming, to that restaurant holding as if she had carelessly chanced across the Holy Grail, were some hairs from Lionel Walter's head. That very ordinary shoe-manufacturing head that I would never have recognized the second time I saw it, had it not been next to Soralee's.

It had begun with a game at Synanon.

"You're full of shit," Gingie the Stripper, who loved her, told Soralee. "You say you care about Synanon but you go back to Beverly Hills and smoke pot and drink booze and do nothing, you do absolutely nothing for Synanon, you're a pimple on the whole philosophy."

"She smokes pot?" Gingie's husband said. "Our



friend who really digs Synanon and what we're trying to do, she goes home and turns on, man? What, are you crazy?" he stared at Soralee. "You so fucked-up you can't stand reality, man, is that how ugly you are? You come to my house and you're probably dropping acid and coming here with brain damage, you've been playing the game and thinking you can *give* something to all these freaked-out dope fiends when you've got brain damage."

"I never took acid, I wouldn't," Soralee said.

"But you smoke *pot*."

"Oh, fuck off, Bobby, everybody smokes pot," Gingie said.

"You're ruining my game," Bobby said to her angrily. "You're breaking the rules of your own game. You're not supposed to defend her."

"I'm not defending her. The indictment stands. I just want to get to the bones of it, the part that really matters, and that is that she's a pimple. With all her fancy words and her funny insights and her Love, her big overwhelming Love, she hasn't done a thing for Synanon except come down here a couple hours a week and play the game and work the Data Lounge, which is more than a lot of you other cocksuckers do, but it isn't enough, she better start really contributing something."

It was a funny game Gingie was playing, filled with carom shots at everyone else in the group, using Soralee, bad-mouthing the non-resident she most enjoyed seeing,

as an exercise, while they were in the room. A funny game, but it still upset Soralee.

"But I've been talking to everyone," Soralee said. "I've been telling all my friends. . . ."

"We don't need public relations," Bobby said. "Another public relations man. We need goods."

The goods Soralee decided to get, and the very next day, were shoes.

He was waiting for her in his inner office, inside a vast complex of buildings in Century City, a lot of which he owned but pretended not to, because it embarrassed him that leather and gold-chain trim could have the power to extend itself into steel and tinted-glass siding. The office itself was all black leather and brass, and angular modern objects, paperweights, crystal octagons with barometers and clocks inside, ex-wives and children caught in heavy glass, peering at him unloving, distorted. On one walnut paneled wall hung citations from the various charities to which he had contributed, and in the lower right-hand corner, as if it really hadn't happened, a photograph of Lionel shaking hands with President Kennedy.

A bookcase filled with matching leather bindings, embossed in gold to pick up, subtly, the plaques on the citation, was built into the wall by the black-tinted window. It looked to Soralee as if an anxious decorator had picked the most impersonal successful-man layout from *Esquire Magazine*, and was temporarily allowing Lionel to be in the picture. Just as he seemed to be merely

passing through his clothes, which belonged, really, to a younger, nattier man, who spent his summers in Italy and the best part of the theatre season in London.

"Oh, goody, a casting couch," Soralee said, and flung herself full length on the oversized black leather sofa. "Get rid of your secretary, Lionel, I intend to seduce you."

His voice, like everything else about him, seemed to belong to someone else, a great booming instrument with a metallic edge to it, which he constantly subdued into a whisper, lest someone discover the true owner and rip it from his throat. "Listen," he said, "I'm really happy to see you, I'm always happy to see you, but I'm up to my ears in work, and I wasn't expecting any visitors, and . . ."

"Get rid of your secretary," she said. "You're a very big man, you can take time off from work any time you want to."

Helplessly he waved his secretary outside and closed the door. "Do you want me to lock it?"

"Oh, you're so funny, you're really so funny." She got up from the couch and kissed his cheek. "You silly sweet man."

"Well," he said, and his frightened eyes looked past her, and he took her arms from around his neck and sat behind his desk. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Did you just make that up? Did you just think of that right this minute, right on the spot?"

"Don't make fun of me. Not you. I know how stupid and ordinary I am."

"Oh, Lionel." She was around the desk and on the side of the great black wing chair, and her arms were around him, and she was cradling his head against her chest. "Oh please, don't think that about yourself. You're a lovely man. You're a darling man. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. I was only joking, you've got to learn to start joking."

"It's a little hard to have a sense of humor when there's nothing funny about you except you."

"I'll get you shots," she whispered against his hair and smelled it for the first time. "I'll send you to Dr. Paul, he can fix anything, and I'll get him to give you booster shots. Self-booster shots. And ego pills. You've got a dangerous ego deficiency, you can't run around with that, you might catch anything."

"You're holding me," he said, and for the first time his voice had a little laughter in it. "You can't do that unless you want to get us both in trouble. You're going to get us in trouble."

She didn't laugh aloud at the time because it would have hurt him. But she saw how ridiculous he was, because in spite of all the pity and compassion she felt for him, his view of himself was coldly accurate. He was a funny little man, middle-aged and beaten, stuffed into his skin like an overcooked potato. And she was married to one of the handsomest men she had ever seen, who loved her, even though he didn't show it in

public, who made beautiful children and a fine living and would have a brilliant future because at a dinner party in New York she had seen that moron Dave stick his hand up the skirt of Rosalie Lacey, and told Ted about it, and Ted had accepted the job anyway.

"So why'd you come here," Lionel said, "aside from the pull of my incredible, irresistible charm? You very beautiful woman." Hands on her face, shyly checking, as if what his eyes showed him could not be true.

"Oh well, now we're down to it." She slipped away from his touch, because it confused her with its unexpected tenderness. "If you underestimate yourself, you also overestimate me. I'm no different from the rest of the bimbos you're so afraid of. I intend to use you."

She told him about the shoes, and he said he would be more than happy to give Synanon all they needed, in whatever size. She thanked him and threw her arms around his neck at the door. He said again she better not do that because they were going to get in trouble. And laughing aloud now because she realized just how incredibly foolish that was, and couldn't conceal, even from him, how foolish he was, she kissed him on the mouth. And kissed him. And let herself be kissed again. And fell apart inside.

"Oh Jesus," he said, against her mouth. "Oh Jesus, kid, you kill me. I want you so badly, I feel so badly."

"Want you badly, feel so bad," she said. "Can't you get anything right?" But the joke was hollow, because his lips were on her mouth, and his hands were all over

her, seeking, and she was letting them seek, wanting them to find places they had never been before, and with her, pressing herself so tight against him her own breast had his heartbeat in it, jagged, irregular, too fast, too fast, she was afraid for him.

"I'm crazy about you," he said.

Every word out of his mouth was ridiculous, anachronistic and dopey, there was no other way to describe the words coming out of his mouth. But that was what she heard, that was in her ears. What was on her mouth were lips that were softer than any lips she had ever felt, and on her breast a more tender-exploration than any ever launched.

"What's going to happen?" he whispered. "What's going to happen to us?"

"Nothing," she said, and broke away.

"You're just like the rest of them," he said, and his eyes, his tired eyes, were angry.

"I wish I were," she said. "Isn't it awful? Isn't it stupid? I want you as badly, feel as bad as you do."

"You have to be crazy." He looked at her pleadingly, waiting for her to disagree. She could not.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" he said.

"Nothing," she said, and even as she said it, knew she was lying.

When she got home she played with her babies, and tried to hug them all the way into her breast, so the yawning chasm that had suddenly gaped in the quake inside her would be filled. She bathed them and caressed

them and sang to them and, after nearly suffocating them with the power of her embraces, put them to bed; but she still came away with the emptiness. She cooked something monumentally complicated for Ted's dinner, which he actually enjoyed. But it was still there. She drank a good deal that evening, and when it came time to take her bath gave herself a powerful douche, because even though nothing had happened with Lionel, she could already feel his juices inside her, and was afraid that Ted might feel them too. Just before she got into bed, she took a sleeping pill, because she could not bear the thought of his efficient love-making, where her orgasm was dispensed with in as businesslike a manner as he conducted the rest of his affairs, before he straddled her and took his own free ride. She did not have to tell him she was too tired, because he was absorbed in an interview on television and by the time it was over, she was asleep, her back to her husband.

Her young, irresistible husband. That funny little man. That funny, tender, curiously moving little man, who actually moaned at her touch. It was insane. It was ludicrous.

She couldn't wait.

Of course I did not know any of this at the time. She had not told me before the silence at the marathon, and would not tell me any of it until she had left the pool, respecting the silence temporarily as much as

she might have disrespected everything else. I might have guessed, I suppose, as implausible as it was, when I saw how he watched her at those two dinners, when I heard how she spoke of him, with what unwarranted attention and insight, at that lunch we had. I might even have put it all together by figuring out the distance she could have covered in those few minutes she was gone from Verita's restaurant to return with her triumphant smell, because I knew where Lionel's offices were; she had twice pointed them out to me. I might also have known it the moment she pulled away from the middle-aged television executive, because of all those at the marathon he reminded her of Lionel, as he would have me, if I had bothered remembering Lionel. As I said, I could have added it all up, but I am not a police reporter or a detective, I am a journalist, and I can tell only what I see and hear, I can deduce nothing, especially when it's madness; inconceivable. Obvious now, but out of the question then, essence of Lionel in that envelope.

She handed it with its contents, carefully to George when we all got down to the poolhouse that morning after breakfast, wordlessly imploring him not to lose it and to mark it hers. We were back in the two same lines in the water, floating, rocking, Henry, poor Henry with his snake-bitten toe, keening to the music, eyes closed, as he passed the body in front of him along. And suddenly Simon was out of the pool, the great white fox hair seeming to pull him forward so he walked



on a naked slant, aggressively, toward the phonograph, as the group started passing Annie. Weeping mutilated Annie.

Sharp, piercing eyes flashing back to the water to make sure the line was moving slow, and Annie was indeed still at the beginning. Simon placed the needle on her own personal selection: Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, which all of us remember and love from *The Snake Pit*, when poor Jan what's-her-name sang "Going Home." That flashed through my mind, that *Snake Pit* scene, the moment I heard the music, but I could not anticipate how accurate the flash would be.

Weeping Annie was sobbing now, naked on her back being floated wordlessly in that line, her lovely young body heaving, physically heaving, as the sobs choked her throat. Simon was over the ledge, carrying a rose that never touched the surface of the water, catapulting himself into the pool with a grace and ease unexpected in a man his age and bulk, so not a second was lost, not a split second of that terrible, pathetic sobbing. He signaled to the men and women who had been there before and knew what was expected, and the lines broke, and they were moving in on her, two on each limb, spread-eagling her in the water as Simon waved the flower beneath her nose and the sob became a moan, laughter, grief, everything.

And then he was behind her, signaling them to hold her firmly, as his fingers reached for her cheeks, and he

began, pressing, clutching, ripping, I am not sure, I can't remember, because my mind is shattered with the sound of those screams. Never, never have I heard such screams; oh yes, perhaps, in that put-out-of-my-mind-and-only-remember-the-baby maternity wards, where at least the women could shriek for guns so they could kill themselves or beg someone to kill them. But Simon's people were not permitted words, they could only scream, that was the purpose he had told us, get out the rage, get out the grief, get out the gut-level screaming. My God, what screaming. Thrashing and fighting and spread-eagled and screaming while all the time the music played "Going Home," and I could only think "That's right, that's what this is, is the Snake Pit," as he plunged his fingers against the muscles of her throat, and she screamed with an agony no actress alive could ever hope to imitate.

My God. He stopped and signaled us all to move in around her, as she lay there in the water, spent, sobbing. Trudy and Cynthia and the minister, all those who had been there before, moved next to her, cuddled their cheeks against her face, her arms, the wracked surface of her body, sustaining her with cheeks and hands and fingers, while Simon plowed through the water and went to get the baby bottle, with its enormous calf's nipple, from the edge of the pool, returning to put it in Annie's mouth, comforting her with the rose and the skin contact and the nipple. She drank from it without opening her eyes, and the sobbing ceased.

Then he was signaling them to grab her again, the bottle was passed to George who held it out of the water, as Simon went to work on Annie's gut-level rage. And it was there all right. Right in the pit of her belly, just above pubic bone, as he hacked and hammered with the edge of his hand, with the side of his wrist, stabbing with stiffened fingers at her visceral rage and grief. If I had heard screams before, I forgot them now. Echoing out of that water, up to the opaque glass dome of the roof were shrieks of anguish such as I had never heard in my life. I looked away, I had to look away, and I saw Sorallee, weeping. For Annie, I supposed. For Sorallee, I suppose now. For all women, I would like to suppose.

It stopped. The screaming stopped. Comforting bodies were close around Annie, and the bottle was back in her mouth, and Simon's lips were pressed against her forehead. The bottle was taken away, and gently, very gently, he righted her. Her arms were around him, and she was kissing him, happily, gratefully. She was kissing everyone, and her eyes were radiant behind the tears.

Maybe he knew what he was doing. Maybe it was worth that agony to get to the radiance, I don't know. I certainly didn't know then. But in some dim corner of my brain, I envied the radiance, and thought I might be able to take the risk, if I could have it end like that, looking like that, feeling like Annie seemed to feel,

even though she was mutilated inside. Kisses for everyone! Drinks on the house! Innkeeper, another round! Was it in me, anywhere, to be that open? Even as I was drawn toward it, I pulled away, physically pulled away, left the two lines of people moving back together, facing each other and went to my friend, who was shivering in the corner of the pool. Weeping wordlessly.

Simon saw me leave the line, seemed to make quick mental note and focused his attention back on the group. The record was changed to Nick's music, hairy Nick whom one would never guess listened to music at all, any more than he looked at people with his eyes, any more than he could speak in a tone that was less than an apologetic whisper.

It was less than a whisper now. It had turned into a great raging animal cry, as Simon worked the anger loose from his jaw, and with almost no interval, lashed out at his gut-level grief. Right against pubic bone. Just above genitals lashing the water. And if Annie's wails had ripped me with their women's pain, Nick did me in for men. Spread-eagled, two people fighting each limb as he thrashed and struggled, he hollered, belowed, gave deep-throated cries that no human being could produce. Animals screamed that way. Animal children.

The bottle was in his mouth and he sucked it gratefully. When it was over, when he was on his feet, the one he embraced, the one he kissed and hugged and

burrowed his face in the chest of was Simon. And the rest of the men. I saw, and I saw Soralee seeing. And I saw in her face a deeper understanding of Nick than Simon was to have that day. He was still weeping, and Simon deposited him in the arms of Cynthia, who cradled him and rocked him, like the baby he was, kissing him like the man he was not, as he wailed with animal grief.

It was Trudy's turn. She was the first and only one to yell, "Stop." She spit the bottle with its giant penis nipple out of her mouth and dryly started retching in the pool.

I wanted no part of any of it. I disappeared in the great beautiful shadow behind Soralee and imagined they'd never find me, for looking at her. I was wrong, of course. He found me, Simon Herford did, came looking for me, sniffing me out at the edge of the pool, sending woodsy George to stand behind me, to sit behind me, so I could feel his naked body against my back while those warm loving fingers worked on my neck: Simon, levering himself out of the water with his great rosy forearms was in front of me, supporting himself now on one hand, so the other could touch my legs, pulling them slightly.

"It'll be easier if you take part," he said. "You're wrong to keep yourself out of it." Seducer's words, from

lips I would never be drawn to, so another better, surrogate seducer's mouth was on my throat, urging.

"I'm afraid," I said.

"Don't be," said Simon, punctuating it with a kiss from the lips of George. On my lips. Moving around, smiling, slipping the body across the nakedness of my arm so I could feel it, feel all of it. And it was in front of me, with its wonderful eyes, pulling at me with its beautiful, young arms. And I was in the pool, going with him, going anywhere he wanted me to go. Up. Eyes closed. On my back, floating. Kissed. Loved. The lyrics of "My Foolish Heart," a song as quaintly, recently antique as I had been feeling, loud, battering my brain. And there it was, the nutmeg flung against my nose, and I could smell it all, taste it all, hear it all, remember it all. I saw a white flash. A white flash.

I was high on a hill with my childhood love, I was young again, and everything was ahead of me. I saw a white flash. It was overpowering. I don't know. Maybe I was overwrought. I seem to be so overwrought lately. When it dies, when the dream begins to die, when everything you thought you wanted to fight for, the husband who loved you after the husband who respected you but never could transmit the passion, and then you find the passion and the passion begins to go, and you touch the children that should make all the dif-

ference, should fulfill the part of you that's shrieking with emptiness, and they begin to recoil from your touch because they're getting older, and touching is a child's thing, and the only dream that's left is what you can do with your brain to earn money, to merit acclaim, and it all becomes so sordidly financial, and the acclaim will never be there because the most you are is very clever *for a woman*, and soon that will be drained out of you, the crow's feet are dancing around your eyes, and it's only a leap and a dash to menopause, and then you won't even have that distinction, that curious vulnerable *period*, that *curse*, when that last dream begins to die, I suppose it's easy to see a white flash.

I wept, and wept openly. Soralee said we can always find an executioner, so I waited for the pain. I owed him that, for allowing me to weep.

The pain never came. There were sudden terrible screams, that were not coming from me, bellows and wails and horrible cries, and in my confusion I was almost sure they were not coming from me. Someone hurriedly set me on my feet, and I was standing there, wobbling, weeping, dizzy. In the corner by the steps, Simon was dragging, pulling Nick from Cynthia, whom Nick was very absorbedly trying to drown.

"Get over here, you assholes," Simon was shouting. They rushed through the water from where I stood,

weeping still. It took seven men, finally, to free Cynthia from the powerful, drowning animal grip. And all the while Nick stood howling with murderous rage unfulfilled. Simon signaled for Cynthia to be cradled and rocked, and she was carried off, bottle in her mouth, weeping, all the while Simon kept muttering, "Assholes. Assholes."

I was alone, disoriented. At the edge of the pool Nick continued bleating, pounding the water with clenched fists. I lay my arms on the cool blue tile, and wept into them. And in a moment, there were arms around me, and fingers were on my head, soothing, separating the Medusa curls, cooling the exploded brain. I turned, not even caring if it were George any more, just wanting another human being.

It was Soralee, and her great red-rimmed eyes were full, for me. I moved my lips in a mute "thank you"; she shook her head, and told me no, no need. And I was weeping into her neck while she carried me to the shallow end, and made a bench of her knees, which I climbed on to, gratefully, as she comforted, and hugged, and patted my hair.

Near us, on the steps, the gas station attendant was calming Nick. After a little while, when Nick was almost quiet, weeping Annie took over, held Nick in her arms, rocked him, and signaled us to come over and touch him, too. I started to get up and move to them, but Soralee held my arm, pulling me back, while she shook her decline to Annie.



In the center of the pool the group was helping Simon free the grief of the man from the nudist colony, whose important part splayed the water like an angry fish caught on a baitless line. He did not scream or shriek as the others had done, he cried like an infant, WAAHHHH, as Simon plowed into the base of his belly. When it was over, and he was on his feet, he beat at Simon with little-boy fists, helplessly, ineffectually. Simon grabbed his wrists, pinioned him and held him, signaling to the rest of the men to come around and hug.

They came around and hugged, all except for the acid freak, who resisted Simon's pull with a threatened karate chop, angrily left the water, and lay on the tile behind us, face down, doing his yoga breathing. On the steps, Annie was kissing Nick now, and he was returning her embrace, passionately. She looked up from the kiss, over his closed eyes, and motioned us again to come beside them. Again Soralee held my wrist, firmly, and shook her head. No.

I didn't understand why. In a moment I understood. Annie was in the water, dropped, thrust downward, and Nick was bellowing again, as he tried to choke her, make her vanish under the water. Soralee screamed for Simon, and Simon was there, yelling for the assholes to help him, as he tried to loosen Nick's grip on her

throat. They freed Annie; Simon hugged her, while Nick howled like the hairy wolf the full moon, or, maybe, as it was ten in the morning, the warm pool had transformed him into.

"Are you all right now?" Soralee whispered into my little-girl ear.

I nodded my assurance, not daring to break the silence with even a whisper, as she had done.

"I can't take any more," she said. "I've got to get out of here." She set me gently on my feet, and sliding carefully past raging Nick, made her way up the steps, stopping only to look at the giant baby bottle, in the bucket at the pool's edge. Her mouth made a slight *moue* of disgust, and she was out of the water.

Simon was behind her as she moved to the glass doors. "Where do you think you're going?"

"You call them assholes," Soralee said, in tones just loud enough so I could hear. "What are you, what does that make you? Didn't you know that was going to happen with Nick, you great *psychologist*?" The title was an accusation: He had stopped six years too soon. "Couldn't you see, couldn't you tell what was going to happen when he came up from the bottle loving you, loving the men, not even seeing the women? Didn't you know he would want to kill any woman who was kissing him? Look at him, freaking out all over the pool because of you. What are you going to do now?"

"I've had enough of you, missy." Simon was panting

from the exertion. "You stop trying to run things. You get in the water and participate and you shut the hell up or you get the hell out."

"Before anybody else tries to kill anybody else, it'll be my greatest pleasure." Stalking, the Queen of the Prom, having a snit, leaving the dance floor, naked. Slamming out of those great glass doors, shuddering them to their fragile foundation. She was back in a moment, her exit ruined, having forgotten her wrap: the envelope.

Her beautiful envelope, with the magic ingredients I didn't know then. But she got it from the box and pressed it to her cheek, smiling, before she disappeared into the cold glare of sunshine outside.

I suppose I, too, had had enough. Simon was starting to go to work on woodsy George, and I didn't want to hear his gut rage being exorcised. I think that might be why I left, why I got out of the pool, and got my towel, and pulled it around me. I think I also might have felt my friend needed me. Either that, or I wanted my mommy.

When I got back to the guesthouse, she was in the kitchen, eating, ferociously ripping at the remains of the morning's coffee cake, carefully pulling the innards out, leaving herself only the outside, dieting even as she gorged. "Are you all right?" I said.

"I'm furious," she answered, stuffing. "Did you see what was glued on that bottle? A typed little direction, Scotch-taped to that bottle: 'For needy adult babies.'"

God, that shows contempt. He has such contempt. How is it possible to have such contempt?"

"I saw a white flash," I said. "I really did."

"It wasn't even that it was just degrading, stuffing that bottle into people's mouths. It's unsanitary. He could have at least changed the nipple." She shuddered, and ate.

"I'm sorry you didn't go through it, Soralee. I really saw a white flash. It's an experience. Whatever else it was, it was an experience, and how many of those really are there in life?"

"I can't handle any more experiences. I'm up to my ass in experiences," she said, and started, quite suddenly, amazingly, to sob. Now my arms were around her, and she was weeping on me, telling me about Lionel.

Infidelity, like a big party, needs careful planning. At least it does if it is going to be carried off with any style, considered a success: If everyone is going to be talking about it the next day in one case; if nobody will be able to talk about it because there is no way of their knowing, in the other. Soralee and Lionel did foolish things, uncautious things, because neither of them had had any experience with adultery before, and they couldn't wait to get their hands on each other.

After that first, surprising embrace in his office, when he unleashed in her a tenderness so fierce she thought

she would die, literally expire, if she could not let it free, she knew it was only a matter of time and timing. The latter was execrable: She would phone him during the day on her private line, while the housekeeper was at the park with the children, and it was safe. He would not take her calls, because he was afraid. At night, when his fear was overwhelmed by his longing, he would phone her on the line that had extensions throughout the house, and Ted might be beside her, or listening on another phone, and it was dangerous; they could not talk at all.

"How are you?" he would say, weakly. And because Ted was there or could be listening, she could not even answer, "I can't talk now," because then Ted would know something was going on, even though it hadn't happened yet. Might never happen, if they didn't get their signals straight. The thought of it never happening destroyed her. She spent a great deal of time, face down on the floor of the living room, wondering if her husband suspected there was anything wrong.

Despair. She looked at her teeth in the mirror and saw that they were darkening. She tried to give up smoking and realized if she succeeded she might live long enough to have them darken just with age, so started smoking again. Three and four cigarettes at a time, burning in different ashtrays. Waiting for the phone to ring, watching the clock, and hoping he wouldn't call, because it was too late, and her husband was home. Again. She envied all the women who were

sad because their husbands had meetings at night or said they had meetings.

Driving out to Synanon, tears stinging her eyes, because she didn't have his unlisted phone number—the fool continued to duck her calls during the day, she was insane even to think about him, much less want him, besides, she didn't even know where he lived—she passed a billboard on Pico Boulevard advertising a mortuary in the Valley. The copy read: "The Sensible Choice," and she realized, of course, it was, and thought of suicide, so the anguish could be laid to rest in that clear-thinking funeral parlor. But she couldn't die until she had him, and once she had him, there would be no need to die. Dying was stupid, she knew that, as she managed to bring herself back to laughing at how stupid he was, how stupid they both were.

One night, when she could stand it no longer, and he phoned, she said she would meet him for a drink. Ted was in the bedroom, watching a filmed replay of some NFL highlights. She could not tell if he had been listening, but he was on the side of the bed farthest from the telephone, and football usually absorbed him completely, so it was a good risk.

"I've got to go out, they're having a crisis at Synanon," she told him, which was brilliant, because the switchboard at Synanon was so fouled up he'd never be able to get through and find out if she was there. She met Lionel at Stefanino's, which was moronic, because everybody, waiters, customers, knew both of them. Even

though it was late and the restaurant was almost empty, anyone left might guess, might see where his hand was, underneath the table, might see how she was looking at him, and might tell Ted where she had really been and with whom.

"My tongue should be there," he whispered, his fingers on the inside of her thigh.

"Oh, stop saying things you think will get me excited," she said, excited as she had never been. "Stop talking like your development was arrested in the middle of an old movie or you've been reading dirty books."

"I'm sorry," he said, and pulled his hand away, and studied the tablecloth with weary, sad eyes.

"Put your hand back," she said softly. And seeing the hopeful little-boy glow on the tired face, melted. "Better than that, take me someplace where I can kiss you. I have to kiss you."

The place he took her to was the parking lot behind a movie theatre on Sunset Boulevard, which was worse than insanity, it was suicidal, because he was in the middle of his latest divorce, and his wife probably had detectives on him, and they would be there, in living color, in pictures, in court, groping each other like teenagers in the front seat of his Mercedes. She didn't care. Her arms were around him and she was smelling his hair, leaping into his mouth with her tongue when she could raise his head from her breast, kissing him with a ferocity that frightened her. His finger toyed with the elastic of her pants.

affection, I guess you could call it . . . that I want to lavish on him. I've got such a surfeit of affection, and the children and Ted, well, they just don't absorb it all, I thought they would, but they don't, apparently. Nobody's ever loved Lionel, you see, not really loved him, and I do, I can. It would be so terrible to die, and never know somebody could love you, does love you, the way I love Lionel. Wouldn't it be terrible, wouldn't it be pitiful to go all through life and never have that?"

"You can't give affection to everyone who's never had it, Soralee. The world is full of people who've never had affection and love, and you can't give it to them all."

"I know," she said. "I just want to give it to Lionel."

"And what happens when you meet another Lionel?"

"You think I'm a whore, don't you? You think I'm disgusting and I'll turn into a whore."

"I think you're a lovely, intelligent, wonderful woman who just hasn't had enough tenderness in her life, that's what I think. I'll tell you about all this: I'm not surprised. I'm surprised at who it happened with, but I'm not surprised. There was always something missing with Ted, I always felt it, but I wasn't sure what it was. I mean obviously he loves you, but the, I don't know, open affection just wasn't there."

"It's not his fault," she said. "He was always pretty, even when he was twelve. He doesn't need to hold hands, because he was doing it when it was the right



time, the proper age, when all the rest of the kids were holding hands. Everybody except me and Lionel. We're late bloomers, you see. It figures we'd start blooming all over each other. Oh dear. Oh dear. I guess I'm really a slut. I don't feel guilty at all. I'm just so afraid he'll die soon, and as long as he's here I want to play with him. I have to blow my nose." She was up, flashing past me, into the bathroom, noisily blowing, and came back, her face washed again, shining. "Do you think I'm a slut?"

"I think you're wonderful," I said. "I think you're a fantastically loving woman."

"Well, that shows how much you know. I'm just a well. A fucking bottomless well, loaded up with tenderness that nobody can get out of me fast enough. A fucking bottomless well."

"Maybe that's why they call it the curse," I said. "Maybe that's what it is to be a woman: a big, empty, bleeding. . . ."

"*Hole!*" we screamed together, and immediately started laughing. And then our faces were close, and we were in each other's arms, sobbing, and I turned toward Soralee. And figured, what the hell, why not find out. I kissed her on the lips, and she kissed me back. And that was all it was, a kiss, because we loved each other. No passion, no follow-up, no reaching for each other's breasts or genitalia, and no wanting to. Soul caressing soul, via the mouth. I pulled my head away and smiled. She smiled back.

"Well, that's a relief, anyway," I said. "Continue the lurid details."

The remarkable part was she did not even feel she was being unfaithful. Ted had her in between, whenever he wanted her, which was not quite as often as she wanted Lionel. She never told him she was too tired, and bathed and douched with extra care, because he liked her to be very clean, and she was afraid, if he were being generous, he might taste Lionel. She began to be somewhat frightened when, even with Ted's head thoughtfully between her legs, she could only bring herself to orgasm by clutching his hair and making it thicker and rougher in her mind, so it became Lionel working away at her. Except at the orgasmic moment itself, of course, when she couldn't have cared less who it was.

The last she considered a sane sexual reality. "I mean I couldn't do it with dogs, Marion, but orgasm is orgasm, it's just there, happening, you can't think about what's making it happen." What made her feel the slightest bit guilty was the fantasizing, so she tried to reverse it, and make it fair, by pretending Lionel was Ted; it didn't work, she had to change him back into Lionel. Smell Lionel. Feel Lionel.

"The whole world married to the tired businessman, thrashing the bushes to find the handsome young stud. And I'm married to the handsome young stud and long-

ing for the tired businessman. Oh God, but he's so tender. It isn't in my mind, it isn't only in my mind. It's in his fingers, the way he touches me, God, how beautifully he touches me."

Sometimes, she would try to make Ted's touch be Lionel's touch. But it was heavier, more urgent, and he intruded his own private heavy breathing, so she was forced to realize who it actually was, and was angry.

"Let's just be more careful," she told Lionel on the phone. "No more office, no more your house. Find someplace unlikely where we can't run into anyone. And let's make it the whole day. Please, I have to have you for the whole day. Eight hours. Alone."

"My God," he said, "I haven't even been with myself for eight hours."

"The whole day. I have to."

They settled for the whole night, a thoughtful gift provided by Dave, the moron, who sent Ted on a business trip to San Francisco. Soralee told her housekeeper she was turning off the phone and going to bed early, so if Mister called, tell him she was asleep. She locked her bedroom door, which would not be suspicious, as they always locked it so the children wouldn't invade at six in the morning. She called a Beverly Hills taxi and ordered it for the corner, so the housekeeper

wouldn't hear it pull up. She slipped out of the patio behind the master bathroom and tripped into the night, holding in her laughter, eluding the warden, which was what they called the housemother of her college dorm—that was how young she felt. And happy. And silly. And alive.

The place he had chosen, sensibly, sanely, for a change (she was afraid he would tell her the rendezvous was at the Beverly Hills Hotel, and go explain away to the people in *that* lobby) was the Park Sunset, an antiseptic apartment hotel on the Strip where nobody anybody knew stayed any more because of hippie pedestrian traffic on Sunset Boulevard, and those who might wander in. She entered by the rear steps, up the back fire escape, past the pool, as he had instructed, and went to the room number he had given her.

The cold motel room was banked with flowers, baskets and baskets of all varieties of flowers, and on the impersonal faded bedspread, roses and daisies spelled out: SORALEE. "Oh, you fool," she whispered, hugging him. "You sweet lovely extravagant fool. How'd you do all this?"

"I had the florist deliver a bunch to the room. The rest I carried in from my car. I did that myself," he said proudly, pointing to the bed.

"The management's faith must be greatly restored. They must think there's a movie star at the Park Sunset."

"But there is," he said, and kissed her. So tenderly there was no hope for the flowers on the bed, no time to even save them by moving them aside.

"Did you feel a thorn?" she whispered into his hair. "I think I felt a thorn."

"You mean a prick?"

"Don't try to seem silly, you're beautiful."

"You're crazy."

"I guess." She sat up on the bed. "My flowers are so beautiful."

"There aren't enough of them. There will never be enough of anything, not for you. I get sick when I go shopping because I can't get you presents. I want to give you presents."

"You're my present," she whispered into his neck, while he told her again how crazy she was, and she proved to him again how crazy she enjoyed being.

At ten-thirty there was a knock on the door, and she jumped. "It's all right," he said. "I ordered something. Go into the bathroom."

She waited for his rap, and when it came, went back into the room. A great white table was laid with china and elaborate silver, filled with caviar and champagne and steaks still grilling in their hot roasters. "Oh, Lionel, it's magnificent. The Sultan of Arabia at the Park Sunset. There's nothing like being inconspicuous, is there?"

"I ordered it from Chasen's, but I paid cash."

"So nobody will ever know, will they?" she laughed, and then said, "Fuck it, who cares."

They nibbled and drank and spread each other with caviar. "It's a delicacy," he whispered, "meant to be eaten slowly. It took me a long time to learn that."

"Oh, but you've learned," she murmured. "How beautifully you've learned."

"All in the eye of the beholder."

"No, Lionel. Not in the eye. Not in the eye."

"You really care about me, don't you?"

"Just feel how I do."

"Crazy," he whispered. "A miracle."

"I'll go along with that."

"I don't believe in miracles."

"You don't have to. You can check it out with evidence. Incontrovertible scientific fact."

"Amazing."

"I'll accept that. It's a great improvement over 'crazy.'"

He had brought her two small gifts, a bottle of perfume, and a diamond set in the center of a gold flower ring. "It's beautiful, but I can't keep it."

"After everything? You going to be one of those women playing coy?"

"It's silly to keep it. I can't wear it."

"You could tell him it was costume."

"There's no way. Did you ever read Somerset Maugham?"

"Not all of it," he said apologetically.

"Nobody's read all of it," she kissed him. "Anybody

who knew diamonds at all would spot this a mile off. It must be at least three carats."

"Four."

"You sweet beautiful man. You *rich* sweet beautiful man."

"I'd like to get you one that would really show."

"You take back this tiny little four carat, but thank you. I thank you with all my heart. With everything."

She did, however, permit him to run one errand for her, sending him out for some lotion at two o'clock in the morning, because he had never had a massage, and she insisted on remedying that instantly. He was gone for almost an hour because there was nothing open but the MFK pharmacy, and she wondered if it would be worth it, giving him a massage, and losing him for all that time. But it was. She started with his toes, each toe, and worked her way up, and over, and onto.

"Oh God," he said.

"I'm not finished." She worked the stiffness out of each finger and laid the creamy result against her breast.

"Nobody," he whispered, "nobody's ever shown me anything like this. The affection, I mean."

"I know what you mean."

"Maybe my father, but he died when very young."

"When I was very young, you should say."

"When we were both very young. I can hardly remember."

"But you can remember a little bit," she said, and

moved against him, around him. "Did your father feel anything like this?"

"Nothing like that," he said. "Nothing ever felt like that."

They did not sleep at all that night, they did not want to, or need to sleep. At five o'clock in the morning they kissed their farewell, temporary at least, and Lionel called a cab for her, because there was no point in taking a chance on his driving her home, even in the fading dark. They congratulated each other on how discreet they had been at last, finally, and agreed that it was much better meeting when there was no way of getting caught.

When she reached the lobby to wait for her cab, the desk clerk was not even there. Just one lone straggling barefoot hippie in an angel costume, a shimmering sleazy pink nightgown, over a pair of pajamas, with a raccoon tail hanging from an Indian purse with a basin attached, eating a cucumber. She turned, and it was Soralee's sister.

"Goddamn you," Angela said. "Are they having me followed?"

"What are you doing in Los Angeles?" Soralee said, as calmly as she could.

"You know goddamn well what I'm doing here, I'm trying to escape my lousy parents, they've had a tail



on me ever since I left the commune in Wyoming, goddammit, how else would you know I was here?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I thought you were following me," Soralee managed to say. "Come home with me and we'll talk about it."

"I'm not going to start stepping in that womb shit. I refuse to get any more comfortable with you than I allowed myself to be with my lousy parents, I'm not getting caught in that trap, I'm a free spirit, I'm not going to get comfortable in that rotten middle-class womb."

"Then don't get comfortable," Soralee said. "You can sleep on the floor."

"I'm not coming. I'm going to stay here."

"Suit yourself."

"I don't have any money," Angela said. "They want me to pay in advance. Do you have money?"

"Only enough for cab fare home."

"Asking me for my fucking I.D. like I was some kind of criminal. My check is good. Do I look like a criminal?"

She stood there, blue eyes flashing under heavy lids, chestnut hair drawn messily into a braid with suede laced through it hanging down her back, the extraordinary costume, the rolled-up men's pajamas, and the basin on her raccoon-tailed purse. "No. Not a criminal. But you do look pretty weird," Soralee said. "What's that supposed to be?" She pointed to the basin.

"That's my foot bath." Defense before the accusation.

"I've got a condition in my toes, I have to have regular foot baths, what am I supposed to do?"

"You might try wearing shoes," Soralee said.

"Oh, fuck you," said Angela. "I'm not going to your house."

"Okay." Soralee started out the door.

"How are the children?"

"Wonderful, thank you. They'd be happy to see you."

"Billy was only an infant the last time I was here. He wouldn't even remember me."

"Maybe not, but he's very friendly, he'd probably be happy to see you anyway."

"And Carolyn?"

"Carolyn is wonderful, that never changes."

"She's overevolved. She's an overevolved creature. She couldn't possibly have come from you and Ted."

"Whatever you say."

"I look at her and I see myself. I see my own self. Don't you see my own self when I was a child?"

"I was away at school and in Europe. I don't really remember. And her hair is washed."

"You have a shower in your new house?"

"As in most middle-class wombs, we have three."

"I'd like to take a shower."

"Then come on."

"You have grain in your house?"

"You mean flour?"

"Nothing chemically treated. I want whole grain. I'll bake you some bread in exchange for the shower. I have

to wait and get my I.D. He went down to check with the night manager. I gave him your name as a local reference, is that how you knew I was here?"

There was a God. "That's how I knew," Soralee said.

The clerk came back and Soralee turned away. "I won't be staying here," Angela said, ripping her card away from him. "But my check is good. Fuck you."

They took the taxi back to the house. Angela did not seem to question the fact that they went in by the master bathroom. "Out of sight," was all she said, seeing the sunken bathtub. "I'd like to jump in that."

"Be my guest."

"Boy, when you sell out, you really sell out."

She stayed for almost three weeks, and in all that time Soralee did not see Lionel. Angela couldn't stand the way Soralee lived, she wanted nothing to do with her, she told Soralee all the time; but Soralee could not go to the bathroom without Angela asking her where she was going and for how long.

"I better move on," Angela finally said. "I'm starting to think I could live like this."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. Maybe up to Santa Barbara, help clear away some of the oil slick. Maybe I'll go back East to be with the Baba people."

One of Angela's past enthusiasms had been joining the cult that followed Meher Baba, a religious mystic in India who had created a new religion, the major content of which, in short sentences, was Love. Baba

had taken a pledge of silence some decades before, saying he would not speak until death, and at death he would reveal the great secret of the universe. Just before he had died, the previous spring, he said: "My time has come." Shortly after that, somewhat disillusioned, Angela had decided to test Baba, see if he really wanted to save her and tried to commit suicide by driving a bicycle through a red light into an intersection in the rain. She plowed into a motorcycle (one of her own people, it couldn't even have been a chauffeured Cadillac) and was in six-way traction for five months. Soralee told her friend Marilyn what happened, and Marilyn said only, "Well, Angela was never *neat*." When Angela recovered, she took an apartment in the East Village, and her mattress came to life, so she had to be fumigated. Ted said they ought to just throw DDT bombs into all the buildings in the East Village, to be sure.

"I wish you would stay," Soralee found herself saying now, even though it meant further separation from Lionel, and a certain peril to her own children, whom Angela would take for walks along neighboring cliffs, sometimes neglecting to take their hands. "You have to hold their hands, Angela," she had exhorted.

"You're so overprotective, you're just like my lousy parents, how are children going to grow if people are hovering over them the whole time?"

"Well, first they have to live long enough to grow up if they're going to grow."

"Cop-out, cop-out," Angela said. "Children have their

own sense of self-preservation. In the commune nobody hovered over anybody, and the children were beautiful. They were overevolved."

"Well, maybe there weren't any cliffs around the commune. These are little children. They don't understand about perils, about cliffs having edges, and falling down into canyons, and what can happen if you wander off alone into traffic."

"Then they'll either learn or suffer the consequences."

"Well, I'm not willing to take the chance on their suffering the consequences," Soralee said. "I'm sorry."

"You see, you see, you're just like my parents, you haven't learned anything at all."

In spite of all this, Soralee was reluctant to let Angela wander off again, and suggested several times she stay in California. "You wouldn't have to live with me," she said, praying Angela wouldn't want to live with her. "You could move into Synanon, I could arrange that, it isn't just for addicts any more, it's gone so much past the drug thing; they're trying to build the twenty-first century out there, and you'd like that, it's overevolved."

"I'm glad you're doing work out there, Soralee, it makes me think you aren't completely drowning in this middle-class shit, but I don't want to go there. I'm not ready for that kind of commitment. They'd want me to devote myself to the society, and I'm still trying for personal growth."

"Well, I hope you make it," Soralee said, as the purse

was stuffed with two heads of lettuce and a grapefruit. "Will you call me and let me know where you are?"

"Why, so you can report to my father?" Eyes flashing again, angry, as they hadn't been since the first day. "So you can tell our dear daddy where the detectives can pick up my trail."

"He isn't our dear daddy, he's yours. But I do have feeling for you, Angela, you're my sister."

"Only half."

"I wouldn't care if it was a quarter, stop being so paranoid, and let me know where you are. I have an old pair of sneakers if you intend walking to Santa Barbara."

"My feet are too big," Angela said, and arming herself with a cucumber, left the house.

The moment she was gone, Soralee tried to phone Lionel, but he was out to her call. She could see the hand waving the secretary away, the finger pressed to lips, the whispered murmur of "I'm not here." She had seen him do it many times when she was in the office, and he was avoiding someone. . .he couldn't stand the thought that he was doing it to her.

"But it's urgent," she said to the secretary.

"What can I do, he isn't here."

He was there. She could smell him through the phone. Hair musky, and vaguely perfumed with men's cologne, and an odor she could not quite identify, but it was warm and male and reassuring, and she loved it, all the while she was hating him for being such a cruel coward. So cowardly cruel. She had no idea what she

was being punished for, but she suspected it was other women's sins, and that was unfair punishment. She wasn't like other women. She couldn't be.

She started drinking at three o'clock that afternoon when he again didn't take her call, and was drunk for her appointment with Dr. Rady. When it was over she phoned her housekeeper and told her to tell Mister she had a planning committee meeting with the Panther ladies and wouldn't be home for dinner. She drove to Lionel's home and waited outside.

"You're crazy," he said, as he parked his Mercedes in the driveway, and saw her coming toward him across the lawn. "It's still daylight. Get in the house." Eyes flicking nervously the length of Rodeo Drive, seeing binoculars in all the windows, intimate friends in each passing car.

"Why didn't you take my call?" she said, when they were inside, and he had ushered her into the side den and locked the door, so the housekeeper wouldn't see.

"You've got to get out of here, I'm expecting some people."

"Why didn't you take my call?"

"It's been three weeks. I figured you wanted to cool it. It seemed like a good idea."

"I told you my sister was here."

"I thought you were using that as an excuse to cool it. It seemed like a good idea."

"I love you, Lionel."

"I'm starting to believe you, that's why I thought it was a good idea to cool it."

"How do you feel about me?"

"How could I feel about you? You're the most wonderful woman I've ever known in my life, there's nobody like you. That's why we have to stay away from each other, there's no way it can't end in disaster."

"Stop dramatizing and kiss me."

She started to move toward him, put her arms around him, but he held her off. "I don't think so. It's been almost three weeks, and we've both lived through it, so that means we'll survive. It's like stopping smoking. The first three weeks are the hardest. If you can make it through the first three weeks, you've got it licked, providing you don't pick up a cigarette. I mean, it's that 'I can take one puff and I won't get hooked' stuff that gets you back on it."

"I don't want to stop."

"We have to, it's getting crazy. You're taking too many risks, and somebody's going to find out. I couldn't do that to Ted, he's a hell of a guy. . . ."

"So are you."

"Well, you only think that because you're crazy. There has to be something wrong with you."

"Dr. Rady says when a man is used to getting beat up all the time, beat up and beaten down, and nobody ever cares about him, it's very difficult to accept something good when it finally happens."



"He sounds like a very smart man, I'd like to meet him sometime."

"He'd like to meet you, too."

"He thinks I'm crazy?"

"No, he didn't say that. But he seems to feel you could use a little help."

"I don't need any help. My life is fine. My life is better than fine, I'm up to my ears in work, there isn't an empty minute in my day. I have no time to think about anything."

"You having any fun, Lionel?"

"I don't have time to worry about fun. I'm too busy."

"Did you have any fun at the Park Sunset?"

"What Park Sunset?" he said. "I don't remember any Park Sunset."

"That's what Dr. Raily says. He says you're too busy being nervous to remember. I remember," she said. "I remember." She started to cry.

"Oh, don't do that." He waved his arms helplessly, coming close to her, flailing his hands around, not wanting to let them light on her. "Please don't do that. Nobody's ever cried for me."

"I can't help what other people have done. I can't be punished for what other people have done. Or haven't done. I'm a very nice girl, I ought to be rewarded, not punished." She was sobbing now. "Give me a handkerchief."

He held it out to her, opened it and held it by the

corner, so their fingers wouldn't touch. "You deserve better than a reward."

"Then reward me. Reward me."

"I'm not a reward for anyone. Nobody could think I was a reward. How could anybody think I was a reward?"

"Reward me," she said. Her eyes were streaming, and her arms were open to him.

"I've got people coming, you've got to get . . ."

"Reward me," she said, and his arms were around her, and his lips were on her mouth.

"Goddammit," he said. "It's that first puff, it'll do it to you every time."

They were both still naked on the couch when the doorbell rang. "Shit," he said. "Oh, shit. I knew I should have gotten you out of here. How am I going to get you out of here? You've got to walk through the bar and the living room to get out of the house, and there's no way. No way. Shit." All the time he was cursing, he was getting dressed. Shoes on, then underwear. "They might think it's a little peculiar if I offer them drinks in the bedroom. Oh, shit. I should have listened to the real estate agent. Never buy a house without a central hallway. Goddammit."

"Isn't there a back way?"

"You've got to go through the living room and the bar to get to the back way."

"So I'll go out the window. That's sort of exciting, I like that. I mean at least you had the sense to buy a

one story. I can't hurt myself jumping out the window, and it's dark out."

"Great," he said. "Just great. You do that. You jump out the window. Only the windows don't open."

She went over to the shutters behind the desk and opened them slightly. The windows were the peculiarly slatted rectangular green glass plates, set one above the other, hip level to ceiling, that one turned facing up or down to permit the entry of air. And only air. There was no way of getting through.

"You could always roll me up in a rug and carry me to the car," she said, trying to cover panic with laughter.

He wasn't laughing. "I'll think of something. I know I'll think of something."

"You do that," she said, as he left the room and she started dressing.

"Did you think of something?" he whispered, poking his head in the door.

"Why don't you take them out to dinner?"

"I can't. One of the fellows' wives died about ten days ago, and he didn't want to go out, he only agreed to come because I said I'd feed him here."

"Then I guess I'll just have to wait till they go."

"But it's going to be a very long evening. What'll you tell Ted?"

"I'll think of something," she said, and he was gone again.

She looked at the glass slats in their metal moorings and concentrated very hard. She tried to loosen one of

the metallic corners, but it was soldered to the frame. She pulled at the glass. It was stuck, age and weather had wed it to the metal, but it would come free. There was no doubt about that. With patience and effort, it would come free.

When he came back in another half hour, she had pried three of the slats loose, pulled them out, and placed them on the floor. She was working on the fourth, which would make the exit way wide enough.

"My God," he said, "I always thought you were bright, but the full level of your brilliance never really hit me till now. You're doing it. You're going to do it. What a marvelous girl you are," he said and started laughing, as she had never heard him laugh. And he was hugging her with genuine pride and affection. "This will have to go down as one of the great nights in my life; of all the things I have ever been through, this will have to go down as one of the most ludicrous, brilliant highlights."

"Well, don't write it in your memory book," she said, as she pulled the last slat free, loosened the screen, dropped it into the bushes and climbed through. "Now if only I don't get shot as a burglar, we'll be all right."

"I adore you," he said, as she jumped to the ground outside the window. He looked at her with eyes so loving, the way every woman must be looked at at least once in her life, that she knew, for the first time, she was actually beautiful. And with that look he became handsome. Irresistibly handsome.

"Maybe now that I've worked out how to escape, I'll come back in for a little while."

"Get out of here," he said, smiling. "Quick, before anyone sees you."

"Tell me something and I'll go."

"What?"

"Something about you and me."

"What?"

"It's easy. Bigger than a breadbox."

"I love you," he said.

"You see," she reached her hand up for his and squeezed the warm loving fingers. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"It's the hardest thing I've ever done. I don't want to mess up your life, my love."

"But you can't, I told you that. Not as long as you stay in it. Promise me you'll stay in it."

"I have to," he said. "I'm hooked again."

"Thank God," said Soralee.

When she got home, Ted was waiting for her, angry. "I'm up to my ears with your causes," he shouted. "Your silly time-consuming causes. I had to put up with your creepy sister for three weeks, and then I come home, the first night I can be alone with you, and you're not here."

"I'm sorry you don't like my sister."

"I don't dislike her, it's just that she's hopeless. Like all your causes. Why are you always throwing yourself away on hopeless causes?"

"I don't think this particular one is hopeless," she said.

"If you're involved with it, the chances are it's hopeless."

"Well," she shrugged, "man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for? And if that goes for man, how much farther away the grasp must be for woman, what with how inferior we are, don't you think?"

"Go take a bath," he said. "I want you."

"You must try to control your romanticism," she said. "You must try to keep a harness on your impulse to speak poetry."

"Go take a bath," he said.



"Oh, Marion," she covered herself with my blanket and wiped her eyes with its corner. "He really says things like 'I don't want to mess up your life, my love.' He actually said that to me. Do you believe the way he talks?"

"Maybe you ought to listen to him. Maybe he's really smarter than you think he is."

"He's much more of anything than anyone thinks he is. Especially himself."

"Then maybe you should listen to Ted and give up on hopeless causes. Maybe it's a pointless crusade."

"But it can't be pointless. I'm enjoying it so much." Tears were streaming down her cheeks again.

"I can see that," I said.

"Oh, it's all this fucking emotionalism, that man down there beating everybody up, rolling around in



all that hot water, it turns you on to sadness, how pitiful it all is. Even the ones who are pretty like Annie are so full of grief. What must the ones who are funny-looking feel?"

"Funny-looking grief."

"Grief isn't funny-looking, Marion, and neither is Lionel. Not any more. The eyes aren't just the windows of the soul, with or without removable slats. They're mirrors for somebody else's soul, and I see myself in his eyes and my soul is beautiful. My face is beautiful, my body is beautiful, everything about me is beautiful."

"But it is," I said. "You didn't need to check that with Lionel."

"Apparently I did. Apparently I do. It isn't only what he becomes when he's with me, you see. It's what I become when I'm with him. I'm a flower. I really am. There's no such thing as a gazania in the abstract, Marion. I mean there's no way you can explain to somebody about gazanias. Either they're open in the sun and everybody can see, or they're all scruffy and ugly in the cold. It's as if they have feelings, you see, that's all they can do is feel. They can't intellectualize or be sensible. They feel the warmth and they open, it's that simple."

"It's a very ordinary flower," I said.

"Well, so am I," said Soralee. "It's only what happens to me that makes me seem unusual. It's only what happens to me with Lionel that makes me feel unusual at all."

"Maybe if you talked to Ted . . ."

"There's no way of talking to him. He knows what I need, and it embarrasses him. It embarrasses him to show affection, he gets very uptight about tenderness, he prides himself so on being a man and sentiment is womanizing, he thinks."

"Then maybe you ought to go to work on him. It sounds every bit as hopeless as Lionel, and he'll live a lot longer, so the percentages are better."

"Oh, I don't know, it isn't that I don't love him. I do love him. He's handsome and strong and he's given me beautiful children. . . ."

"A small consideration. You ought to think about them."

"I can't think. I can't think at all."

"Maybe you ought to start."

"I suppose," Soralee said, routing the wound-up piece of toilet paper from her hand, blowing her nose. "Did you see *The Fly*, did you ever see *The Fly*? I love bad horror movies, don't you, they're so terrible. They put Al 'David' Hedisen in a machine to transform him into another dimension or something, and there was a fly in there with him, and the two got their chromosomes mixed up, so there was this big hulking fly's head on a man's body and over in the corner on a fly's body was this little man's head saying, 'HELP ME, HELP ME.'"

"If I could only put the two of them in that machine and mix them up. Wouldn't that be lovely?"

"What if you ended up with Ted's lack of tenderness in Lionel's body?"

"But that would be perfect, don't you see?" Her eyes were shining at the prospect. "Then I could pick Ted. I do owe him a lot. Oh, wouldn't that be wonderful, where can we get the machine, oh damn, we've got to get hold of that machine."

It was almost noon. The group was starting to wander in from the poolhouse below, straggling in the door, spent, weeping, ripped, ecstatic. Soralee blew her nose again, and smiled at Henry, the fat, middle-aged television executive, went to him and took his hand.

"I'm so sorry about pulling away from you last night." She moved her hand to his cheek. "It had nothing to do with you, I promise. It's just that you remind me of someone, and I'm trying to work things out."

Henry nodded and smiled and patted her head and mouthed, "It's all right." Apparently the group was still on silence.

"OK," Simon bellowed, when they were all assembled again, close, touching, weeping, smiling, in their pillow-bounded circle. "The silence is over. We'll start at the top." He indicated the one at his right, the minister from Pasadena.

"Take it from the top," Soralee said. "It's like an old Dan Dailey musical."

"I'd appreciate your keeping your comments to yourself, missy," Simon said, his green eyes glaring. "We'll get around to you in turn."

The minister was telling us how the experience had gotten him further back to God, how each marathon

had gotten him closer and closer to the God he felt had abandoned the world, or at least was leaving Southern California. And all the time he was getting closer to God, he was being moved further away from his wife, who didn't understand, she didn't understand at all. She didn't realize what was coming out of the sensitivity training sessions he was conducting in the church. She didn't accept how much closer it was bringing the congregation to each other and God. And he felt, he more than felt, he knew, that if she didn't begin coming to the nude marathons and try to grasp what it was all about, the marriage would be over.

"Why don't you just say your wife doesn't understand you?" Soralee said.

"I told you to be quiet," Simon said.

"Well, it's true, what Soralee said," said the minister. "My wife doesn't understand me, she doesn't understand what all this is accomplishing, what I hope to get to from all this. She just keeps telling me she's afraid she's going to come into the church one Sunday and find the whole congregation dancing naked around the altar."

Soralee giggled.

"I admit it's a funny thought, but it's a happier one than the church being empty, because nobody feels any more, nobody cares any more, nobody thinks God is there any more." He wiped the tears from his eyes. "I was beginning to wonder about Him myself. But He must exist, you see, because people care about each

other. I come here and I feel that people care about each other, about each other's grief, about each other's joy. We are different from the animals, because we can weep for each other's pain and laugh at each other's happiness, and there's only one thing that can make us weep for and laugh at each other, and that's the soul. And that could only have come from God."

He told us then about his personal pain, and the room was silent. He told us about the stored-up rage, that he could never release except at these marathons, because he was such a gentle man, the congregation needed a gentle man. There was so much violence in the world that a display of temper from him would be unseemly. Would alienate the congregation. Would alienate his wife, whom he didn't know if he wanted any more because she failed to understand.

"You better bring her to the next marathon," Simon said.

"I've been trying," said the minister. "I only pray she comes."

"You better do better than pray," said Simon. "You better grab her by the cunt and drag her here."

"I can only try."

"You can do more than try, Alex. You can grab her by the cunt. Anybody that exhibited the rage that you exhibited in that pool, anyone that fights like a fucking Moby Dick, that it takes more than the usual eight to hold, why, man, you were a killer whale in there, I never felt such power, we couldn't hold you down."

"Really?" Alex said. "Was I really that strong?"

"You were, and you are. You don't know the power that's in you," Simon said. "A man with that kind of power, whether it comes from God or from his own manly strength, strength he doesn't know he has, can drag his wife here by the fucking cunt. And better do it soon or that marriage is over."

"I know," Alex said softly. "I know."

The nod was given to the man from the nudist colony, who, asked what he felt in the pool, started to weep. "I was on a platform," he said, and his eyes were full, brimming over. "I was, oh, maybe four or five years old and I was waving good-by to my mother, my beautiful mother, and she was waving good-by to me from the back of that train, it was only a short trip she was taking on that train, just a short trip, and I was waving Bye-Bye, Mommy, Bye-Bye, Mommy. And she never came back."

"Why not?" Trudy said.

"I don't know. They never told me. I know she didn't die because once in a while there would be a postcard from somewhere, somewhere out in that big world that had taken my mommy away. And sometimes a present. A lovely beautiful present. But we never went back to the railroad station to fetch her *home*." The last word was couched in a muted sob, as he lifted the bottom of his undershirt, wiped his eyes, and continued.

"And then one day I was standing on that platform, waiting for a friend of mine who was coming in from

Chicago, and there she was, on the back end of the train, waving to me, only it wasn't my mother, it was my new sweetheart, the sweetheart my friend was bringing in his sister, my beautiful new sweetheart, waving to me. And it was as if she came back, you see, it was just as if she came back to me after all, waving from the back of that train. And all the emptiness of those years disappeared, you see, the years were filled by what was waiting for me on the back of that train. And she became my wife, my sweetheart became my wife. And now she wants to leave me, she wants to go away again. I don't know why. My sweetheart wants to go away again. I don't know what to do. I don't understand. I don't understand any of it."

Broken sobs shuddered the silence of the room, and Trudy's arms went around him. "It's all right," she whispered, "it's all right. You just mustn't let her go."

"I don't know how. I don't know how to make her stay."

"Be a man, Edgar," Simon said. "Don't be afraid of being a man."

"I don't know," Edgar wept. "I don't know what a man should be."

"He shouldn't be like your father," Soralee said softly, and looked at Simon, waiting timidly for the silence he would instruct. But Simon said nothing. He nodded, and his look was reassuring, permissive.

"What do you mean?" Edgar said.

"When you came up in the water, you beat at Si-

mon, like a little boy, angry little fists pounding at the air, hitting on his chest like a four-year-old boy." Sorace smiled. "You're very angry with your father, you know. You're still very angry with him for driving your mother away. You must think it's his fault that your mother went away on that train and never came back. So you should face the anger, and either hate him or forgive him. But don't be afraid to be a man, like Simon said. Don't think if you act like a man it will make you like your father."

"I don't even think about my father."

"Maybe you don't know you do, but you do. You're still very angry with him for driving her away. You should face the anger at him, and then maybe you could deal with yourself."

"Very perceptive," Simon said quietly.

And now it was Trudy's turn, and Trudy's grief, and Trudy's formerly suicidal rage, and she felt wonderful, she felt good about everything. She just didn't want that damned nipple in her mouth.

"You mean penis," Simon said. "You don't want a penis in your mouth."

"Ecch," Trudy said, and went into her retching dance.

"Now I want you to go around this circle and tell every man here, looking at him, right in the eye, starting with Edgar and working around, tell every man here how you would hate to have his penis in your mouth, ecch, you do that so well, ecch. And then take it to the



other side, the other side of the feeling, take it with relish, no pun intended. Tell him how much you would love to have his penis in your mouth, yum yum." He was licking his lips, gobbling hungrily, and Trudy was imitating him with her mouth and tongue, all the time her body was moving with dry heaves.

"Edgar," she said, having some difficulty catching his eye, as he was still rubbing them with his fingers.

"Edgar, *Edgar!*"

He looked up, and Trudy smiled.

"Edgar, I would hate the thought of having your penis in my mouth."

"Not the thought, Trudy," Simon said. "You'd hate the penis."

"I would hate, Edgar, to have your penis in my mouth, cccchh." The sound was more convincing, now, moving closer to the actual act of vomiting, which I felt was only seconds away. She looked at his important part and had to avert her eyes. Staring into her lap for a moment, the chest above those monumental breasts reddening up to her throat, she told him how she would love to have his penis in her mouth, and licked her lips. The retching had been infinitely more sincere. She made her way with words and lips and gagging and licking all around the circle, and when she was finished, her arms were sprawled wide, lying helplessly at the sides of her breasts, and her face was bobbing limply on her chest, scarlet.

"How do you feel?" Simon asked her.

"Sick. I'm really sick."

"And do you know why?"

"Because they're disgusting. They look disgusting and they feel disgusting. It's a disgusting thought."

"No, it isn't, Trudy. It isn't a thought at all. It's a feeling. You'd really like that feeling. You want that feeling so much, it's making you sick, thinking about it. So you have to stop thinking about it. You have to stop thinking there's anything wrong with wanting that in your mouth. There isn't a woman here, I'd be willing to gamble there isn't a woman here who hasn't had a penis in her mouth or wanted a penis in her mouth."

"Really?" Trudy said, and she looked positively hopeful, that is the only way I can describe it. Hopeful.

"Except maybe Cynthia," Simon said. Cynthia looked away.

"Let's have a hand count," Simon said. "I'd like to see the hands of every woman in this room who's had a penis in her mouth." All the hands went up, except chaste fat Cynthia's.

Trudy sat, her jaw gaping. "And you liked it?" she said to Annie.

"I sort of liked it," Annie said. "I just don't like it when they come in my mouth."

Trudy started retching again. "Well, one step at a time," Simon said. "You don't have to be *that* nice to him in the beginning."

It was the turn of the acid freak, the self-proclaimed genius, who had stayed out of it the whole time, as

much as I had seen, and he was telling us he had had no reaction to anything at all, he had felt nothing at all in the pool. He had had his own flashes lying face down on the tile, and that was all he needed, he had reached the source of his own infinity, he had no problems at all.

"You're full of shit," Soralee said.

"What?" He looked up, black eyes hanging like Halloween slashes in a pumpkin, angular, unreal, too much light behind them.

"What about what happened in the water?"

"What happened in the water?"

"When Simon tried to get all the men to embrace Edgar," Soralee said, "when he signaled everybody to come around and cuddle him, put their faces around his body to comfort him, Simon almost had to pull you over bodily, and when you saw why he wanted you, what he wanted you to do, you more than resisted him, you would have chopped him down like a tree before you let your face touch a man's body."

"So what?" he said.

"You're a fag," said Soralee.

"Cunt!"

"Maybe. I calls 'em as I sees 'em."

"I am certainly not a fag." Great yoga breaths drawn into the overdeveloped chest, making it even wider, eyes burning in his bearded head. "I am a genius."

"Yes, well, we all know that," Soralee said. "You've been telling us that from the beginning. But I think

you're also a fag. Don't misunderstand me, I don't think there's anything wrong with being a fag, as long as you know it, and work it out, and either start enjoying it or correcting it. I mean, you're not even alive, you don't know what life's about because you're so uptight with fear. That's why you keep doing the breathing, that's why you keep intruding your goddamn yoga tricks on what's going on here, that's why you drop acid and risk damaging your genius brain. You're afraid to let yourself get involved because of what you might find out about yourself."

"Ha!" said Simon.

"You know what you ought to be," said woodsy George to Soralee, beaming his surrogate approval. "You ought to be a psychologist." They were both laughing at her now, Simon and George, approving and laughing at her at the same time. Soralee's fine high cheekbones were suddenly streaked with red, as if she were one of those doctored photographs from the forties, where an untalented craftsman changed a simple black-and-white picture to a colored one, with no sense of art or style or subtlety. Cheeks too red, eyes too blue, hanging on the wall beside a framed photograph of F.D.R. in front of the American flag.

"We'll get around to people who are afraid to *involve* themselves in a minute," Simon muttered. "That's when we'll deal with people who are afraid to *involve* themselves, and *why!*" The promise, the threat, the delayed attack hung in the air like an offshore battalion on a

darkened beach. She shivered beside me, embattled, ready to fight, having either too much courage or too much fear to run.

"Run," I almost said to her. But instead I took her hand and squeezed it, so she would know there was someone on her side, in the trench, and said to her only, "Don't tell them anything. You don't know this group, you don't know the people here, you're right not to tell them anything."

"You'll have your turn," he said to me, my shaman, as his glance lit on the middle-aged sociologist. "Tell us what you felt, Sonia."

And Sonia was weeping, helplessly weeping. Aging hands covered droop-lidded eyes, as she lay on her back, her shoulders against the pillow on the wall, graying hair curling thinly on the tight cap of her skull, as the scar down the center of her stomach, from navel to strawberry pubic hair, stretched and darkened with her sobs.

"Just at the point," she managed to say, crying, "just when I was starting to realize how wonderful sex could be, it was taken away from me, don't you know. He left me for her, and she's so young, and my children are grown, and where is there for me to go. I don't want to be one of those mothers who hang around her children, oh, I've got the money to have my own place, and offers from three universities to teach, but I want it to be near the children, and at the same time I

don't want to be one of those mothers. I don't feel old enough to be one of those mothers who lives, just lives somewhere nearby, waiting for the invitation to come over and see the grandchildren. I love the children and my grandchildren, but I don't want to be like one of those women, I'm not old enough to be like one of those women. Not old enough. But I'm too old. I'm too old. I can't be like the others either. I'm too old to be them. My body is wrinkled, don't you know, my breasts are all shriveled and dry. An old man doesn't want me, he wants the younger one to make him young again. And I don't want an old man, because inside I'm still young, I was only just coming alive. But the younger men, the younger men wouldn't want me either, not with my skin the way it is, not with the puckers around my mouth, and my arms the way they are. Look at the inside of my arms, the flesh is coming loose, it's old."

She could not continue for the crying, and there was silence in the room, broken only by the measured inhaled, exhaled wrack of those sobs. And then George was sitting up, good old woods: George, and he was smiling, and his teeth were as brilliant and hard as his voice was shadowed and soft.

"I don't know if it will make you feel any better, Sonia, but I, for one, think you have a beautiful pussy." Good George, funny, obscene and darling and sneaky and all-the-things-that-sex-should-be George. I forgave

Kit-Edgar-Al. I forgave the old goat-god himself with his silly little pipe and his total lack of conscience. I think, I really think, I even forgave my husband, because he was a man, and so was George, and anything that was like George couldn't be all bad.

"Thank you," Sonia said, and her fingers passed shyly over the pale red pubic hair, as if it were a dress that no, wasn't really passé, George thought it was still pretty, and looked well on her, and so even though it might not be in fashion at the moment, hold on to it, fashions change, no reason to discard it, it could come back in style.

How disgusting he was, and how delicious. Just what Simon was trying to show Trudy about penises. The two reactions he was trying to elicit that could exist, symbiotically, in one human being. Well, maybe that's what it was. Maybe Simon was a very clever man, intuitive as I thought, and bright. Maybe that's what life is, disgusting and delicious. Maybe that's what sex is. Maybe, even, a good definition for obscenity. But obscenity exists, it has to exist, disgusting and delicious, a part of life, turning us off and turning us on, depending on who we are. And maybe we should all be both kinds of people, responding to the truth that yes, life and sex and feeling are obscene, beautifully obscene. Disgusting and delicious. Maybe that's what Simon was trying to say. I don't like to believe, even now, he was simply being vulgar, encouraging us all to be coarse and gross. I honestly don't think he was. I think he was

trying to get us to be honest, with each other and ourselves.

I hoped he would not succeed with Soralee.

Simon's eyes were on her now, cold, so terribly cold, that the laughing shaman had had to slip from his soul to be replaced by the humorless inquisitor. "Now let's talk to George," he said, and looked at George. "George, did you know we were being blessed by a visit from a leading local psychologist, an expert in ESP, a person so loaded with insight that it's a shame, it's more than a shame, it's practically a scandal that all there are outside are rocks and gravel and sand, when we should have had a red carpet. A fucking red carpet, George, where's our sense of planning?"

"I don't know," George said. "We should have gotten together and planned a right welcome for this dignitary."

"Planned it! Planned it! Why the second we saw she was here, we should have phoned Abbey Rents and had them rush up a red carpet, they do those things on short notice, and there's absolutely no excuse for our having treated her as just another human being. No excuse. I can't forgive myself for my stupidity in thinking she was only another human being. What would you think about someone I had stupidly mistaken for merely another human being who was willing . . ."

"You can stop all the carom shots," Soralee said.



"I know what you're doing, I play the game at Synanon all the time."

"I was talking, do you mind?" Simon said, and looked back at George. "What would you think about someone I had *stupidly* mistaken for merely another human being who was willing to pass *all kinds of* judgment on other mere human beings because she was so fucking loaded with brilliant insights and ESP and intuition and knowledge even *I* hadn't gotten in all my years of training, who was also an Old Pro, man, a fucking Old Pro, because she knows what the business of Encounter groups is all about, she goes to *Synanon*. What would you think about such a person, with all those incredible qualifications for taking over the group, what would you think of such a person, who really knows fucking better than anyone here what should be done, and knowing so fucking much about everybody and everything, doesn't even participate. What would you say about her, George?"

"I'd say she was afraid," George said.

"You're fucking A right, I'm afraid," said Soralee. "What was I supposed to be with what was going on in there, in that pool? How was I supposed to react after what happened with Nick?"

"What happened?" Simon said blandly. Nick looked up from his place against the wall where he sat like a contented, retarded child, staring stupidly, not even complex enough to be puzzled.

"I don't want to ruin it for Nick," Soralee said. "I suppose we should wait until it gets around to him."

"Just you stop supposing, if you don't mind," Simon snarled. "I'm still running this, for the moment at least, until you take over officially. You tell Nick what happened to him in the pool."

"You freaked out completely," Soralee said, looking at the heavy, weighted eyes. "You turned into an animal, a terrible murdering animal, screaming like an enraged animal and you tried, you tried to kill people."

"I did?" Nick said, his face blank.

"You tried to drown Cynthia, and then you tried to drown Annie."

"Gee," Nick said, "I'm sorry."

"Will you stop apologizing!" Simon shouted. "Just listen and learn and find out what you are, and grow, and stop apologizing and don't look at the goddamned rug, look at people, damnit, look at people."

"Did I really try to drown you?" Nick said to Cynthia.

Fat and chaste and naked, she still had dignity. "You certainly did. All I was doing was comforting you, and I kissed you, just like last night, and just like last night you were all over me, pulling and squeezing and practically devouring me, and then you tried to drown me."

"I'm sorry," Nick said.

"I told you to stop apologizing," Simon shouted.

"I'm sorry."

"He's right," said Soralee. "You shouldn't apologize. It wasn't your fault."

"And whose fault was it, pray tell us, Ouija," Simon sneered. "Tell us, all wise one."

"You know whose fault it was," she said to Simon, her eyes as cold as his. "You should have seen it coming. And if you couldn't have seen it coming, you shouldn't have taken the chance you took. You don't know enough about the people who come here, certainly not the ones who come here for the first time, to know if somebody could have a psychotic break. It's like dropping acid on a schizophrenic, you might send them over to that other place, and they'll never come back, there's no way of ever getting them to come back." Her eyes were tearing with fury. "It's irresponsible what you're doing. You could have made him go insane."

"Is he insane now? Is he trying to kill anybody now? Or is he purged of his murder? Is he sitting up straighter and almost looking people in the eye, talking to them directly the way he couldn't do when he came here? Isn't the murder purged?"

"I don't know," Soralee said. "I don't know what's going to happen to him a week from now, two weeks from now."

"Well, suppose you just let me worry about that. Let's just worry about you."

"I am worried about me," Soralee said. "That's why I couldn't let myself submit to your tactics. How do I know I don't have madness in me? How do I know you wouldn't have flipped me out completely? Right now I'm going through a problem. . . ."

"Don't tell him," I said. "For God's sake, don't tell him. You don't know the people in this group, you can't take a chance on anyone finding out."

"Let her continue," Simon said.

"It's all right," Soralee patted my hand, "I'm not that foolish."

"Well, maybe you ought to be that foolish," Simon said. "Maybe you ought to stop thinking you know better than anyone, everyone. Maybe you ought to cut the cerebral shit and let it all out."

I looked at him and the white fox hat capping the cherubic rosy face was suddenly filled with flowers, and he was Hedda Hopper, back with us again, longing to get the scoop so he could dish with the other girls around town, tell them all. No more psychologist, group leader. He was a gossip. Or worse. A sudden paranoid flash, back with me now, obliterating the white light he had given me. He wanted to have something on Soralee. He needed ammunition to topple her with, the one total holdout in the group, the only one who had resisted him completely, vocally, with unconcealed anger. "Don't," I whispered. "Don't."

"I'm trying to work out something in my head," Soralee said. "And it's splitting it down the middle. I have children. I have people I'm trying to help. I can't afford to go mad. I can't afford to die. I saw the despair you let loose. I saw the grief you unloaded in that pool. Look around at this group, half of them are still crying, half of them will probably start crying again before the day is over. I have morbid thoughts sometimes, and I'm not a good driver. What if I left here filled with all the despair I saw around me, only inside *me* and I drove down this terrible road, this

awful dangerous road with all its cliffs and fucking blind curves, what if I had let you get to me and I suddenly had the impulse to go off the road?"

"Jesus," Simon said, and he was smiling, "does your mind always leap to the blackest possibilities?"

"Of course," Soralec said. "The blackest possible possibilities are always there, and a lot of the time they come through for me. The only reason I didn't curl up and die a long time ago is that I'm a natural survivor. A friend of mine once told me that I'm like a female Baron Munchhausen, that I keep dancing around this stuff that looks like quicksand, and I say, 'I wonder if that's quicksand, let's see if that's quicksand,' and whoops, next thing you know I'm in it, sinking, up to my chin, screaming, 'Help, somebody help, somebody help, somebody save me,' and at the last moment, when I'm almost gone, and nobody comes to rescue me, I pull myself out by my own hair." She was smiling now, really smiling. I saw she had found it, the scruff of her neck, and she knew exactly what she was going to do about her life. But I didn't ask her, because the answer belonged to her, and not the group.

"Much as we all appreciate the literary apologia," Simon was saying, "as grateful as we all are for the rich education you are laying on us, we would like you to drop the oblique story shit and get down to you, frightened you, pretending to be audacious but scared shitless you. With the mind that always goes to the blackest possibilities. You frightened little girl. You terrified

child. Why, I bet you were even afraid to sleep outside last night because you might get bitten by a rattlesnake."

"The thought had occurred to me," Soralee said.

They started laughing, riotously, laughing out loud, and long. Soralee looked somewhat confused, because as witty as she was, she hadn't been that witty, not just then. We told her about Henry and the snake.

"Oh, you poor man," she said, and went to him and hugged him, as if to make up for the affection she had refused to lavish on him the night before. "Are you all right?"

"He's fine," Simon shouted. "You stop worrying about him. He doesn't need you to be his mother."

"Was I being his mother?" Soralee said. "You think that's what I was doing?" She was not talking about Henry, of course, but Simon couldn't know that, and, as I said, I hoped he wouldn't find out.

"Let's just stop worrying about him and start worrying about you, you troubled little girl."

"But you see how right I was," she said, and her face was glowing. "You see now that I was *right* to think of the blackest possibilities, because they do happen. It could have happened to me, only this time, just this time, it happened to Henry. Someone *did* get bitten by a rattlesnake, and if I had submitted to your tactics, I could have flipped out."

"You're full of shit," Simon said. "Nothing would have happened to you, you're just scared."

"All right. I admitted I was scared. But my psychia-

trist told me if it got to be too much for me, I should leave."

"Your *psychiatrist!*" Simon said, and the word was as full of scorn as Soralee's "psychologist" had been. "Your psychiatrist would have gone through the fucking roof if he let himself go through what we did in the pool."

"I have no doubt he would have," Soralee said calmly. "And as he's a very smart man, through the roof would have been exactly the place to go. That's why I left."

"You left because you're a coward."

"That too," Soralee said. "I've already copped to that. But I'm trying to work out something in my head. . . ."

"Well, maybe you ought to stop working things out in your head, and get to your gut, maybe you ought to stop being such a fucking cerebral sophisticate chained to an outdated, useless psychiatrist, and start working on your gut level, lady."

"I'm sorry I can't go along with you on who is the best Leader for today, the Now, With-it, What's Happening with the Emotions of Today," she said, capitalizing the words with poised tongue, angry lips, clenched teeth. "But you have raised an interesting point with your gut level. May I ask you what, exactly, you know about ovaries? I've had masseuses who wouldn't touch my lower stomach because just one rub a little deep, in the wrong place, and they could do damage. My friend Marion here is concerned about women being

more vulnerable than men, especially naked, and I couldn't go along with her because I thought we were all safely tucked up inside. And we are, Simon. But that doesn't stop you, does it? You just pound away, slash away at that old belly like there were no ovaries inside. If a masseuse is careful because one little rub might do damage, what do you think you're doing beating the shit you say I'm so full of out of them? What the fuck do you know about ovaries, do you even know where they are, what permanent, deadly damage you could do?"

"Of course," he said, as angry as she was. "I had two years of medical school."

"That's a lie," I said. He had told me all his academic background in the preinterview I conducted two weeks before the marathon. "There was nothing in what you told me about medical school."

"I just didn't tell you, because the whole purpose of these experiments is to show what you can do with emotions. Emotions, dammit, and feeling. None of this cerebral shit that needs medical background like those phonies on Bedford Drive parade on their walls. They're doing nothing, you see, they lay you on that couch and let you rave for seven years, and it isn't happening, people only adjust, they don't change, they don't get to where they really are."

"How do you know?" Soralee said. "Have you met them all?"

"I've met enough of them, the so-called cured, the



well adjusted. And they're adjusted to nothing. They're still uptight, fucked-up people. It isn't happening to them. It's happening to these people here."

"Well, it isn't happening to me," Soralee said. "I'm sorry."

"That's because you didn't want to let it happen. But I'll tell you something, old Better than the Rest. There's more happened to you down in that poolhouse, with or without the pain, there's more taking place in you with just the water and the trips you took through it and the trip you took in the light, and all this skin around you, all this emotion you've witnessed, there's more going on inside you than you've gotten from all those years on the couch.

"You're going to have flashes of insight you didn't know you could have, you're as turned on as if you smoked a kilo of pot, or taken five hundred micrograms of LSD. Man, you're going to taste and touch and see and feel like you've never done before, you're going to see what peak sensitivity really means. And when you've understood, with that big clever brain of yours, when you've gotten to what gut level really means, maybe you'll start to spill them. Maybe you'll spill your guts and start to grow."

"Maybe you're right," Soralee said. "Maybe it already happened. Maybe that's why I already spilled my guts. Fortunately I didn't do it to you."

I think I applauded. I think I applauded both of them.

We were dressed now, back in our clothes, back in the civilized shelter for our uncivilized fears. George was in jeans and a wonderful flannel shirt, checkered and colored and warm-looking, like the ones the girls were always wearing in the late forties, so they could seem like one of the guys. I saw how foolish they had been to do that, because it looked so much better on George. I saw how foolish we were all being to want to seem different than we were, because that, too, looked better on George. We were women, and they were men, and hopefully, the twain would never meet, or even if it did, not disappear, except in bed, which at the moment I was hugging him and kissing him good-by, seemed curiously confused with Utopia.

"You're very pretty both ways," I said, "with or without clothes."

"So are you," he whispered in my ear, and I could feel and smell and taste and hear. Oh God, could I ever.

"I have an almost irresistible impulse to feel your genitalia," I said. "I would especially like to feel it inside me. But we did sign a contract."

"I know."

"And we can't contact each other for a week, at least, and I don't think that would be wise, do you?"

"In a week I'll be back in Oregon."

"Then you'll have woods, that's good, it's only right that you should have woods. Myself, I'll have a neat little square of overpriced real estate, with a lawn."

"And that's what you want?"

"That's what I'm committed to. That's what I have to sustain."

"Why?"

"I haven't got your freedom, George. I can't just chuck it all and run away."

"That's a shame."

"I suppose it is. I suppose that's the real tragedy. Maybe we should all be Soralee's sister, I don't know. Or maybe we should all be you. But I don't know if that's a good idea either, not very many people could get away with being you. We haven't got it in us to be pioneers any more."

"Yes, we do. That's what's really sad, Marion. You're looking for the real tragedy, but you're not seeing what's really sad. We're all of us still pioneers, and there's just not so many places left to go. No more frontiers, you

see. No place to explore, except inside. And the moon, maybe. But I wouldn't like the moon."

"Not enough trees," I whispered against his face.

"Not enough of anything." He pulled away from me and looked at his own personal horizon. "Man's still got to take his living from the land. Come home at night, tired and happy and full, because he's done a day's work."

"Woman too."

"Not your kind of work. You ought to be busy baking and keeping the children clean, and making the house look tidy."

"Why, George, you're a male chauvinist, I'm surprised at you. You want to keep us in our place."

"You want to keep you in your place, Marion. You wouldn't like anything better than if someone kept you in your place. The trouble with your place is that it's empty, it's too easy. Everything gets done too fast. The bread comes already baked, the housekeeper sees to the tidying."

"Not my housekeeper. I can't keep a housekeeper. My house is a mess."

"Then clean it up."

"I can't, I'm too disorganized. I shouldn't have to. I'm a very bright woman, I shouldn't have to worry about things like that, I have more important things to do."

"But they're not important enough, Marion. That's why you feel so empty."

"I don't feel empty. I don't feel empty at all."

"I hope not. But I certainly am tempted to fill you up. I certainly am tempted."

"Thank you," I said, and kissed him. "Thank you very much for that. And that too," I said about the kiss, because there was no question about my own temptation. But I could not afford to go fucking in the woods, not me, even though I noticed some local ones, conveniently closer than Oregon, and almost pointed him toward them, almost grabbed him and pulled him and tugged him, and would have bodily carried him there, except that would have been unseemly for a woman, he was much heavier than I. I wasn't sure he could carry me if I asked him, tempted as he said he was, and I couldn't risk the rejection. It was enough that he said he wanted me. That could keep me going for months. Having him would have only kept me going for a few moments, maybe ten, maybe twenty, he probably wasn't even very good, what with how direct it all was when you lived outdoors. I preferred to remember him with how sensational it could have been if we had, rather than take a chance on being disappointed with how it really was, having. George was right about me, I haven't got anything that important to do because I'm not as smart as I think I am, because when you get down to it, I'm really dumb, God, I was dumb not to have him, then and there, fuck the contract.

When I got down to the level where the cars were parked, Soralee was waiting for me, sitting on the hood of her light green Riviera, scratching patterns in the dust with a hairpin. "I wanted to wait to thank you," she said. "To thank you for everything. Not just the talk, the experience. I didn't like it, I still think he's bad, but he can't be all bad, he can't be all wrong, it helped me, it helped me enormously."

"What are you going to do?"

"Why I'm going home, of course. I'm going home to Ted. And I'm not going to see Lionel any more. You're right, you see, the odds are better. Ted does love me and I do love him, I just have to spring him loose. I just have to spring the tenderness in him loose, and man, if I can ever get that to fly, as uptight as he is inside, if I can ever get that tenderness flying free, won't that be something to see, won't that be something to watch and *feel*? I can hardly wait to feel that. But the odds are better, you were right about that, it's a better gamble that I'll make a tender man out of Ted in the years he's got left than restore all the man to Lionel before he dies.

"My sweet tender Lionel. I do love him, but you were right, the percentages are better. I just hope he'll be all right. But I can't make him all right. I can't make it all right for him. I understand that now. I really understand it. Maybe that's what Simon meant by gut level. I feel it in my belly that I belong with Ted. To Ted."

"I'm glad," I said, and really was.

"That's why I'm going to go home to Ted and tell him about Lionel." She hopped off the hood and stood there, glowing in the mountainy sun.

"But you can't," I said. "You'd be a fool. Especially now that you've decided it's over. You can't tell him. You can't."

"But I must." She was smiling at me, blue eyes wetly radiant. "You see, part of what's wrong with me and Ted is that he never *knew*. That he wasn't sensitive enough to know it could happen, that he didn't feel my needs, that he wasn't sensitive enough to *me* to know it was going on. That's what we have to change, that's where we have to start if we're going to build, if we're going to grow, together, if I'm ever going to spring him loose. Oh, can you wait for him, Marion, as handsome and smart and funny as he is, can you wait for him to be sprung loose?"

"You're making a terrible mistake to tell him. Please don't tell him."

"I'm telling him, and it isn't a mistake. You heard Simon in there saying I was trying to be Henry's mother. Well, he's almost right, but he's wrong. I wasn't being Lionel's mother, I was just being a mother. That's what I am, a mother, not everybody's mother, not anybody's, just a mother, we all turn into our own mothers at some point, don't we, much as we think we're different, much as we try to avoid it, flashes of her will suddenly spring up in us, won't they, grim, angry, temper flashes.

And maybe tenderness flashes too. Maybe I was being my own mother, trying to make it up to my own father. Maybe that's what I was doing, was being my own mother, and then it was all right, wasn't it, it was better than all right, it was understandable and justified that I went to bed with my daddy.

"But I don't think I was being *his* mother, I really don't, do you? I'm just a mother, by nature, that's what I'm meant to be. Dr. Rady says that the thing women can really do better than men, you'll love this, Marion, because it does make us distinct, separate but better than equal, in one way ahead—very far ahead. Dr. Rady says the thing women can really do better than men is hear the cry. The cry of the child, Marion. Your own child, other people's children. We can hear the cry, isn't that exceptional? I heard the cry in Lionel, I heard the cry in me. Now I have to free the cry in Ted, you see, not with beating on his pubes like Simon wants to do it, but with beating against his heart, beating against his restraint. I have to free his cry, so I can hear it, and comfort him, lavish all this affection on him, be permitted to lavish all this affection on him.

"But I have to start with the truth, because if I'm going to be as open and honest as you think I am, as I hope I am, I have to get rid of this one hypocrisy. If I'm going to open him up, I have to be as honest as I want him to be. You see that, don't you?"

"I don't see it at all. I think you're making a terrible mistake."



"But it has to start there so he can see, at base, how insensitive this big resistant façade he's hiding behind is making him be. That he didn't even know, that he didn't even suspect. He has to start opening up so he can really react to *me*. So we can start really reading each other and loving the contents."

"Do what you feel you must do," I said, "but I'm afraid for you."

"Oh, you're a worry wart, Marion. He won't do anything. It's over, the important thing is it's over, it isn't as if he found out while it was still going on. And it isn't as if I could really damage his ego, like it would have if the man were Cary Grant. Oh damn, I never did meet Cary Grant."

She grinned, and was into her car, sliding across the front seat, turning the ignition on so she could lower the automatic window and reach for my hand. "I can't wait, really. I just can't wait to spring loose my beautiful Ted. But first I'm going to take a bath with my children, I feel absolutely turned *on*." She pushed in the car's lighter. "We've never done that, we have that big beautiful sunken tub and we've never used it, not all together, we were too busy labeling everything penis and vagina for Carolyn so she wouldn't grow up neurotic, and all the time we were hiding ours. Maybe Ted will get in, too, if we can strip away a little of that rigidity, won't that be wonderful? I just want to *feel* everybody. I guess Simon did get to me." She squeezed my fingers, released them, blew me a kiss, and reached

inside the loaded ashtray for a stubbed-out cigarette. "I love Ted so, I really do. I love you, too, you know, I can't thank you enough, for being my friend, for bringing me here, everything."

She straightened out the slightly bent cigarette, put it between her lips, and reached for the lighter. "On second thought, I think I'll give up smoking. This minute." She took it from her mouth and broke it into the ashtray. "I want to live a long time, a long long time with that wonderful man, can you wait to see him sprung loose? I can't. Oh God. I can't wait to get home. Call me tomorrow morning. But not too early. I intend to do beautifully dirty things to my husband, all night long."

She stepped on the gas. Her car, too wide, too luxurious for Soralee, seemed to have absorbed her spirit, and Buick though it was, zipped out of there into the bright afternoon like a motorcycle, careless and bumping and free.

The one thing Soralee had always cautioned me with about pot was driving. "I mean beautiful things like food and making love become unbelievably more beautiful, because time is so attenuated, you taste with every fiber of your tongue, you feel with every muscle and bone and tissue of your body, and orgasm lasts so long, it's magnificent, it goes on forever," she had told me. "But you mustn't drive, Marion, because things

become distorted, you think you're going too fast and you're going too slow or you think you're going too slow and you're going too fast. You can't really judge timing or distances. God, I can't wait to turn you on but I'm a little unsure of how to do it, because the first time you should be in a social situation so you don't get paranoid, with really loving friends and that's me, but at the same time you should be able to have the best of it, and that's making love with Jerry, you'll like him all over again I promise, so how are we going to get you back home to do that, because you mustn't drive."

We had never quite worked it out, and as I was secretly afraid, I was relieved we couldn't work it out. I had never turned on. Not on grass. But I was turned on now, I could see that driving along that treacherous road. Simon hadn't been kidding when he said we were as turned on as if we had smoked pot or taken acid. Colors bounced back at me, trees were coming up at me from the wooded hill below, attacking me with green; the sun, although it was waning day, glared at me with orange ferocity, a ball, a bright aggressive ball, pitched directly toward my eyes, invading my car. The jagged sheared-off mountain to my right suffused me with grays and browns, colors I had never considered overwhelming. But they overwhelmed me now, as the rocks poised threateningly above my head, ready to fall on me if I weren't careful, or even if I were. I hunched in tight against the wheel, as if it could protect me,

would protect me if only I didn't push it too hard, make it go too fast. Was I going too fast? I couldn't judge, and managed in a tortured second I was sure would result in my plummeting off the road, to look at the speedometer. I was going eight miles an hour. I laughed, but not too long, because that was fast enough, more than fast enough, the curves were blind, the road was unpaved, and there were cliffs, half of the drive was bordered by cliffs, all of them waiting for me.

Not all of them. It wasn't possible to remain in that state of dim paranoia. Not all of them were waiting for me. One of them, all along, had been waiting for Soralee.

I saw the smoke coming from below, I saw it, didn't dream I saw it, wished that it had been a turned-on hallucinating dream, wish it now. I think I knew, the moment I saw it, what it was, and hoped that it was psychotic freaked-out imagination, and not the terrible reality. But the reality was there, far below me, burning and exploding and not even any more distinguishable as light green. Just flames. Orange and red and licking white flames, eating away at the pink and yellow light that had been Soralee.

The coffin was not opened at the funeral, the terrible wracked days that came before, the terrible droning now that was the service. I thought it right that the coffin was closed. Not just that she was burned and mutilated, that they hadn't even found one breast, one beautiful honey-colored, pale pink nipples breast; it should have been closed because Soralee was dead, and dead she couldn't be Soralee. Because she was alive, that's what she was about, was living, so whatever was in that coffin wasn't Soralee.

I had had enough of vocal anguish at the marathon. I had had enough of screams and shrieks and animal whelps. But I would have preferred it to the sobbing. I almost thought they should all get up and scream the pain and the anger and the deprivation, rather than just sit there weeping as they did. I looked around at a chapel filled with lovers, foolish friends and Synanon people, unkempt sister and too-chic mother, crying behind sunglasses like Madam Nhu, the father who had never been there, there, the father who had taken over weeping with equally shattered tears. I couldn't cry, of course, I never can. But other people wept, and it angered me that they only wept; none of them groaned, none of the people who were there, none of them thrashed and howled and beat the wooden benches as they should have, none raised fists to the sky. Only one, and that was Ted, but not until we were at the cemetery, that horrible infinite cemetery, which was not at all the Sensible Choice. It was madness. Sheer mad-

ness. Bizarre, stupid accident, stupid, stupid and unfair that someone should be dropping a fistful of earth on that closed coffin, and that was all there was to be.

But nobody screamed at the funeral service. None of her many loves. Not either of her actual lovers. Not even Lionel. But maybe he was off somewhere, screaming, I don't know. I can't say for sure, because he didn't come to the funeral.

When it was over, all over, the visiting mourners, the sympathetic friends, even the family, we were alone, the two of us in that house, that curiously deserted house, Ted and I. I thought it was intrusive, my being there, after everyone else, even those who thought they loved her better had gone. But he had asked me to stay. Quietly but strongly asked me to stay.

He closed the front door, murmuring his trancelike, polite thank yous to the last of them, and came back to the living room, his eyes as hollow as his footsteps on the terrazoed floor. "You want a drink?" he said, and touched my trembling hand.

"Don't be polite," I said. "Please don't try to be polite. And not to me. Certainly not to me. It's my fault. It's all my fault. I never should have taken her there with me."

"Stop," he said. "Please stop blaming yourself. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't anybody's fault. It was an accident, that's why they're called accidents, because

they're not anybody's fault. They happen, that's what makes them accidents. They're irrational, we have no way of knowing they're going to happen. They just happen. It had nothing to do with you."

"I want to kill him," I said. "I want to go and kill Simon Herford for putting us in that danger, making it be so far away and undriveable. Getting us so turned on and then letting us drive all that terrible way. That terrible murderous way. He said he always had to make it remote like that, be that far from everywhere, everyone, so no one would hear the screams or they'd call the police, because they'd think someone was being murdered. Someone *was* murdered. I wish somebody would call the police. Somebody should call the police now. Somebody should kill him. I want to kill him. I want to kill myself."

"Don't," he said, his hand on my shoulders. "It wasn't your fault."

"You're a very kind man," I whispered. "Very generous and very kind. I'm glad she was married to you. So was Soralee. She couldn't wait to get home to you, I suppose that's why she was driving so fast."

"Was it?" he said, through lips so dry the words stuck to each other.

"Of course," I said. "That's the last thing she said to me, was how she couldn't wait to get home to you."

"Thank you," he said.

We sat there for a while, and I watched him crying, because there was nothing else to do. Nothing else

either of us could do. Everything had been done, that human beings can do, and that's all we were, that's all we are, we have no real power to restore. Oh, maybe wounds, and maybe phantom loves, or lack of them, but that's all the best of us can do, and the best of us was gone, and there was no way to restore her.

"I'd like you to do something for me," Ted said, when his weeping stopped. "I'd like you to go see Lionel."

"Lionel?" Stupidly, not shocked enough.

"Lionel Walter," he said. "You've met him a couple of times with us, you know who he is. And he'll know who you are, Soralee talked about you all the time, so she must have told him how close you two were."

"What do you want me to see him for?"

"I want you to tell him she loved him, that she was leaving me for him. That she was coming home to tell me she was leaving me for him."

"I don't understand."

"I think you do. You see, like they say," he tried to smile, "I still have the children. But Lionel has nothing at all. Not her. Not any part of her. Let him have that. His life is so empty, we ought to at least let him have that."

Insensitive man, she had called him. I looked at Ted beside me on the couch, and saw his face, his handsome, swollen face, the eyes that she had thought too insensitive to her to see.



"She thought you didn't know."

"I knew from the minute it happened. I knew it would happen before it happened, before Soralec knew it would happen. I knew from the moment he sat beside us the first time, when I saw how pathetic he was, how funny and relaxed she tried to make him, but how hopeless and pathetic he was, that she would have to make him think he was otherwise. That there was only one way she could convince him he was otherwise. The poor, sad, ineffectual bastard."

"And you never said anything?"

"If I had said anything, she would have had to make a choice. I couldn't take a chance on having her make that choice. I couldn't risk losing her." He started to sob, open womanly sobs, and I touched his hair and was no comfort. "Now I've lost her anyway, so we might as well give him that. We might at least let him think he had her, that he was going to have her. Let him come away with something."

"She was going back to you," I said. "It was over. It was all over. She was going back to you because she really wanted you. And only you."

"I believe you," he said. "I do believe you. I knew, I hoped that that was how it would end if I didn't say anything, if I just let her work it out in her own way, in her own time. She always did the smart thing eventually, it was just her impulses that were foolish sometimes. I knew she would do the smart thing. I hoped the smart thing was me." He wiped his eyes

with his hand. "As long as it was, let's let him have that. Let's let him think it was Lionel."

"He wasn't even at the funeral."

"He was probably afraid to come. Afraid to cry. Afraid I might guess."

"You're a very beautiful man," I said. "I'm glad she was married to you."

"So am I."

The offices of Lionel Walter, the seat of all that industry and frenzy, were cold and impersonal, exactly as Soralee had described them. I tried to look at him, seated behind his great black desk, with her eyes, to see past the fright and confusion at my presence, and behold the tender little man hiding in him, somewhere, probably dead now, because what had made him come alive was dead. I couldn't see any of it, but then the eyes aren't just the windows of the soul, with or without slats, they're mirrors. And I didn't see myself in Lionel's eyes the way Soralee had, because he could never look that way at me. And might not look that way at anyone again.

"Look, you're very nice to come here and tell me you were with Soralee that last day, but I wasn't expecting you, I've got a million things to do, and there are people waiting. . . ."

"Do I frighten you as much as she did? There's no need, you know, I'm not at all like she was, no matter

how wonderful she might have told you I am. I'm a very cold woman, I could never have any feeling for you at all, I don't care whether you live or die, but Soralee did, and I thought it was important for you to know. But you don't have to give me the kind of speech you gave her. . . . I have no intentions of seducing you."

"She told you?"

"She told me everything," I said, and watched his middle-aged little-boy face drain white, and slashed it whiter with an exaggerated, second "Everything."

"Did she tell anyone else? Does anyone know?"

"My God, she's dead, what's the matter with you?"

"I just don't want anyone to get hurt, that's all, anyone else to be hurt, there's no need for anyone to be hurt. Not now."

"You mean her husband, or you mean you?"

"I mean her husband, certainly I mean her husband, he's not the kind of guy who would do anything to hurt me, do you think?"

"You're a pig," I said, "a selfish, self-involved pig. The girl loved you, and the girl is dead, and you're so tied up in your own little knots all you're worried about is you." I was on my feet, furious, ready to leave, unwilling to give him the gift Ted had so generously arranged. He didn't deserve it.

"That isn't true," he said, and started to cry. "It really isn't altogether true. I'm a coward, I admit it, I've always been a coward, and she was the only one who thought I was strong, and she's gone now, she isn't

here, so there's nobody to think that I'm strong. Nobody to make me think I'm strong. So I'm weak. That's what I am. I'm a weak man. I always knew it, she was the only one who wouldn't see it, and now there's no one to see me any different from what I am. What I really am."

His handkerchief was over his face, so I couldn't see it. But I think he must have become a great deal prettier than I had thought he was.

"She was leaving him," I said. "She was leaving Ted for you."

"What?"

"She told me at the marathon, just before she left to drive down the mountain, she told me she was going to leave him for you."

He was sobbing openly now and blowing his nose. "She was crazy," he said. "She had to be nuts. She had to be nuts to go to that marathon, and she had to be crazy to be in love with me. She had to be out of her mind to leave what she had to come and be with me. Crazy. Crazy."

He was shaking his head, and blowing his nose, and weeping when I left, hating him. Despising him, really, because she had given him that beautiful present that was herself, and he hadn't known how to accept it gracefully. And I had given him the final beautiful present, courtesy of Ted, and he couldn't accept it at all, with or without grace. He had to label her crazy, because that would explain everything, at least to him. A woman

would have to be crazy to be in love with him. He couldn't understand what Soralee was all about, so he didn't deserve her. Not in memory, not in actuality. He didn't deserve to have her even tucked up in his mind, and hadn't ever deserved her in her pulsing beautiful flesh.

And the thought of that, finally, the thought of that flesh, burned and disintegrating under the ground, made me cry. Accident is shocking, stupid and bizarre. Death is outrageous and unreal, even when you know it is coming, when you fear its coming. When it happens suddenly, with no warning, with no reason, it is madness, and madness is frightening, it is paralyzing, repulsive, staring at you coldly with no light in its eyes. It cannot move you to compassion or grief. At least it cannot move me.

But flesh, lost flesh, like nutmeg in your nose, flung at you cold now, redolent with memories of warmth, can melt the hardest of us into wailing. I stood in the hall outside Lionel's office, supporting myself on interior decorator's walls, leaning hot cheeks against the cold black mirrored surfaces, watering phony potted decorator's plants with tears that could never make them grow. So few tears in me, how profligate to dispense them on artificial plants. So short life in her, how foolish to spend it on someone it couldn't bring alive.

I cried awhile in that corridor, till those making their way to and from the elevators, embarrassed me with staring into remembering who I was, who I am, and

what I never do. I took the elevator down to that great impersonal subterranean garage and found my car, and sat in it for a while, reading, till my eyes stopped looking red.

Ted had given me an old book of Soralee's, a dog-eared college copy of Pascal's *Pensées*, with passages marked in red, and little prep-school-trained, college-girl printing in the margin. Number thirty-six had its first sentence underlined. "Man is full of wants: he loves only those who can satisfy them all." Above it, one day, long ago, Soralee had scrawled, almost carelessly for that type of penmanship, the rigid intellectual toilet training in that semiprinted style, "Hey! What about woman?"

Woman. Brimming over with life, in that old dead book. Brimming over with thoughts, immature thoughts, sometimes, but thoughts nonetheless. Bursting with enthusiasms for dead philosophies and dead men.

The one who deserved her, and all the time and all along, was Ted. And she hadn't known that about him. So she wasted it. She wasted part of her lovely light by casting it on Lionel, and waste is stupid. Waste is inexcusable. I forgive her of course, but I'm a little angry with her for not knowing, because that means she wasn't as bright as I thought she was, and I loved thinking she was that bright. But maybe intellect has nothing to do with it. Maybe emotion has everything to do with it, and I don't understand that, because I am unemotional.

Or maybe, with all her deep insight, she didn't really

want to know about Ted; maybe she really liked thinking he was insensitive because of how he behaved. Perhaps he should have cried when she was alive, so the cry would have told her, forcing her to listen.

But then, Ted couldn't have done that, I suppose. If Dr. Rady is right, and what distinguishes women, their peculiar gift, is the ability to hear the cry, maybe what distinguishes men isn't a penis at all. Maybe what labels them men, manly, in their clothes, is the reluctance to make the cry, the reticence to make it, and call themselves coward. Their failure to make the cry when it would do them the most good, when a woman is longing to hear it.

Not that Soralee would have heard the cry at the time. Not that she wanted to hear it. Not that she could hear it now if she wanted to.